Chapter 1
The Subaltern Condition: Hegemony and Fragmentation
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1.1 Understanding Subalternity and Operations of Power

In order to understand Morrison, Tan and Gurnah’s texts the theoretical framework provided by theories of subalternity is very helpful. All three are postcolonial writers. They are, however, not only concerned with the issues of Western colonization over native populations, but their texts also reveal other forms of oppression like the oppression of women, children, and economically and educationally backward classes. Thus, understanding subalternity can throw light on how oppression operates in various spheres of domination. These forms of oppression are ultimately interlinked. It has also be studied, how the oppression of African slaves and totalitarian rules in some independent African countries are alike, what the phases in the oppression of African Americans are, how the domination exercised over Chinese women is different in their native land and in diaspora. These issues will be explored with regard to the novels selected for study and insights provided by literary theory will come in handy in throwing light on oppression revealed by these works.

Subalternity in its current usage in literary theory is an umbrella term for the condition of being oppressed either due to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, age or any other attribute of one’s subjectivity. The term subalternity was first used by Gramsci in his Prison Notebooks (1971), out of prison censorship, but also as a more holistic and inclusive term for the oppressed. The literal meaning of the term subaltern is an army person whose rank is lower than that of a captain. Gramsci in the first notebook uses the term in this sense. However, later in the Prison Notebooks (1971), he used this term to refer to those oppressed by their class. ‘Subaltern’ then stands for the proletariat. This is how scholars usually understand the interpretation of the term ‘subaltern’ in Gramsci’s Prison Notebooks (1971), limiting it to its Marxist application. In the latter mentions of subalternity, Gramsci uses the term, as Marcus Green observes:
Figuratively in nonmilitary instances, in regard to positions of subordination or lower status. It is in this figurative or metaphorical sense that Gramsci uses the term “subaltern” when referring to subordinate groups or classes… In Notebook 25, Gramsci identifies slaves, peasants, religious groups, women, different races, and the proletariat as subaltern social groups.” (2)

Gramsci was not just concerned with class emancipation but also the liberation of other classes. He writes about women’s struggle: “The formation of a new feminine personality is the most important question of an ethical and civil order connected with the sexual question… women can attain not only a genuine independence in relation to men but also a new way of conceiving themselves and their role in sexual relations…” (587).

Gramsci approaches subalternity from various angles. He systematically tries to understand the origins of various subaltern positions, the working of oppression and power, and its countering. Gramsci observes that for the liberation of subaltern classes it is necessary to consider and study:

I. the objective formation of the subaltern social groups, by the developments and transformations occurring in the sphere of economic production; their quantitative diffusion and their origins in pre-existing social groups, whose mentality, ideology and aims they conserve for a time; 2. Their active or passive affiliation to the dominant political formations, their attempts to influence the programmes of these formations in order to press claims of their own, and the consequences of these attempts in determining processes of decomposition, renovation or neo-formation; 3. the birth of new parties of the dominant groups, intended to conserve the assent of the subaltern groups and to maintain control over them.” (202)

Gramsci’s concept of the subaltern is related to other concepts like hegemony, organic intellectuals, common sense and types of governance. For Gramsci, the subaltern experience is tied to the experience of power that not only operates through coercion but also through hegemony or domination through consent. In defining hegemony he says, “The state is the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its domination, but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules” (504).
Gramsci gave the concept of the integral state which was formed from the unification of the state and civil society:

What we can do, for the moment, is to fix two major superstructural 'levels': the one that can be called 'civil society', that is, the ensemble of organisms commonly called 'private', and that of 'political society' or 'the state'. These two levels correspond on the one hand to the functions of 'hegemony' which the dominant group exercises throughout society and on the other hand to that of 'direct domination' or command exercised through the state and 'juridical' government." (145)

Political society comprises of the juridical and administrative components or governmental forces, whereas the private institutions formed by the public are included in the civil society. However, the two are interlinked and comprise an organic unity. The state influences civil society and in that sense is dominant. They exercise hegemony in structures of civil society, causing a subordination of social classes by consent. Thus civil society, according to Gramsci, does not exist out of the sphere of politics, but is a part of it. Gramsci writes, “The historical unity of the ruling class is realized in the state, and their history is essentially the history of states. But it would be wrong to think that this unity is simply juridical and political, the fundamental historical unity, concretely, results from the organic relations between state or political society and civil society” (202).

Hegemony in one crucial sense is not the final achievement but must be persistently maintained. It has to be fought for continually. This implies, too, that hegemony must be undergoing a constant de-formation for it to be in a process of constant formation. Thus revolution must always already be going on in some sphere of society. This also entails that there must be some form of struggle between opposing ideologies, each trying to gain control over what is otherwise exterior to its sphere of power and ideologically opposed to it. Roger Simon in Gramsci’s Political Thought: An Introduction, points out:

Hegemony can never be taken for granted, but has to be continually fought for afresh. This requires persistent activities to maintain and strengthen the social authority of the ruling class in all areas of civil
society, and the making of such compromises as are needed to adapt the existing system of alliances to changing conditions and to the activities of the opposing forces. (42)

The idea of compromise is central to the maintenance of hegemony. The subaltern is made to believe that she is in fact included in the sphere of power and not expelled from it when actually there exists no such co-optation. Gramsci in his writings tries to explicate certain norms, tendencies and patterns in oppression. He contends that subalternity exists in phases. Due to a change in economic relations, there is a creation of a certain subaltern class that either adheres to the new social formation or tries to exert its own influence. The dominant class initiates certain programs to maintain its domination, however the subaltern class realizes that the new programs exclude its needs and hence makes its own organizations. Lastly, the subaltern group organizes a political formation that represents its concerns, tries to replace the existing dominant social formations and tries to overthrow the oppressor.

Another important concept of Gramsci’s that is relevant particularly to Subaltern Studies is that of organic intellectuals. The organic intellectuals, according to Gramsci do not work from their political consciousness from ‘without’ but work closely linked with the histories, folklore, and traditions of the subaltern. They work as the thinking and organising element of a particular fundamental social class. According to Gramsci, “These organic intellectuals are distinguished less by their profession, which may be any job characteristic of their class, than by their function in directing the ideas and aspirations of the class to which they organically belong” (131). The Subaltern Studies Group is an example of organic intellectuals.

It is not just the organic intellectuals who think for the subaltern populations, but the subaltern too possesses a “common sense” which is an uncritical, unconscious and ideological way of thinking or as Gramsci says, “a traditional conception of the world” (430). The subaltern “common sense” according to Gramsci is fragmented and hence s/he cannot produce world views that are conducive to overcoming hegemony. The interplay between thought and action in Gramsci’s theory is quite apparent. Action to overthrow dominant classes happens with the transcendence of ideology and hence common sense. It is this transcendence of what Kate Crehan terms as the “explicit conception of the world” (115). This conception must be replaced by an implicit conception that lies in opposition to a borrowed conception of the world.
Transformation of common sense is an important means of shedding ones subalternity and hence moving towards agency.

Gramsci’s thought, born during the storm of Fascism is inherently political and revolutionary. He reworked traditional Marxism to establish an epistemology of the structuring of oppression and resistance politics for the acquisition of hegemony. Roger Simon writes:

Consequently, we experienced the freedom and freshness of Gramsci’s writing as liberation, revolutionary in its impact. Here, what was undoubtedly a limitation from a textual point of view - namely the fragmentary nature of his writings - was, for us, a positive advantage. Gramsci’s work resisted even the most concerted effort to knit up its loose ends into a seamless garment of orthodoxy. (8)

There have been several appropriations of the concept of subalternity by later thinkers, chief among them being Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Spivak’s take on subalternity is different from Gramsci’s, in that Spivak’s is a more rigid perspective. She considers the subaltern position neither as a linear progression, nor as a condition that moves from one stage to the other. Unlike Gramsci, in her early writing, for her if the subaltern speaks, she is no longer a subaltern, because she has crossed the very feature that defines her as being a subaltern. She defines the subaltern as: “I define the subaltern as the person removed from all lines of social mobility. That is, the subaltern is barred from access to all public resources that would allow for upward movement, out of dire poverty and into political invisibility” (67).

In Spivak’s terminology, a denial and consequent absence of voice marks the subaltern experience. The subaltern is excluded from the dominant discourse and is starkly affected by a non-representation in history. This was the motivation behind the Subaltern Studies Collective’s efforts at representation of the subaltern.

According to Spivak, the representation of the subaltern in the dominant discourse is as the other, that is, if they are represented at all. Their representation, is, as it were, surrounded by the relatively huge corpus of the dominant discourse. They are denied a voice, representation and movement towards representation by the
dominant discourse. In an interview with Nazish Brohi, Spivak defines subalternity as being related to context:

You don’t work to give the subaltern a voice. You work against subalternity itself. The word subaltern, of course, is a military thing, used by Antonio Gramsci [an Italian Marxist theoretician and politician] as he was trying to work beyond his prison censorship. I took up the word because it is truly situational. It is not meant for just anyone experiencing discrimination. You have to relate it to the context. In my paper, for instance, the context is the desperation when suicide becomes a way of sending out a message. (3)

The essential first step, according to Spivak, to transcend the subaltern condition is a consciousness of this condition. Representation through another speaker alone cannot reverse their condition because they will still be spoken for by someone outside of their condition.

In this regard Spivak compares the subaltern women’s condition to that of the heretic. Both are considered to have the need to be spoken for. Both call for a masculinist-imperialist mission to liberate them by speaking for them. However, this second hand articulation of the subaltern’s needs would hardly liberate the subaltern. Liberation in fact should come from the corpus of utterances by the subaltern herself, no matter how fragmentary.

There has been a major move towards giving voice to subaltern experience through the work of the two major developments in historiography in South America and South East Asia. These groups of scholars have made current Gramsci’s notion of subalternity and have introduced it to contemporary discourse. There is an elitist bias when it comes to historiography. History usually represents the powerful and the voices of the subalterns are left out of record. The Subaltern Studies Collective was formed to rewrite history from the perspective of the repressed classes, castes, gender, age etc. Ranajit Guha, one of the founders of the Subaltern Studies Collective, defined the subaltern very broadly as anyone who is subordinated “in terms of caste, class, age, gender and office or in any other way” (1).
The Subaltern Studies Collective, believes, however, that there are always traces of the subaltern even in the oppressor’s historiography that is often a fabrication. This History preserves traces of smaller histories, if only for the purpose of domination. This is the gap which subaltern struggles utilize in their move towards representation.

Rafael Vizcaino in his paper “Subalternity: Genealogy and Critique”, traces the developments in subaltern studies, particularly through the critique of the South Asian Subaltern Studies Collective and the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group, but also through a review of the appropriation of the idea of subalternity by various thinkers. He traces the inflow of poststructuralist currents into subaltern studies. He observes:

Gyan Prakash worked upon Guha’s Gramscian notion of ‘the subaltern’, increasing its theoretical sophistication by incorporating the insights of French philosopher Michel Foucault. According to Prakash, the combination of Guha’s Gramscian notion of ‘subalternity’ and Foucault’s analysis of ‘power’ results in ‘subalternity’ being defined as “an essential object in place of class- an effect of power relations and expressed through a variety of means- linguistic, economic, social, and cultural. (3)

Foucault’s poststructuralist stance on subalternity extends the idea of subalternity—beyond the idea of “rule by consent”—to the making of passive, disciplined bodies. Gramsci and Foucault, both formulated their theories based on the existing social and political organizations, their historical evolutions, and how their operations in civil society were oppressive.

The idea of discourse runs through Foucault’s major writing, and he elaborates on it in his *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1982). Discourse is a set of statements that are linked and have some form of effect on meaning-making systems. Discourse becomes an important concept because these statements are politically charged and are linked to relations of power. Discourse, however, is not a negation of reality or something that restructures reality like ideology. Ideology is a distortion of an essential reality which must resurface for the liberation of certain classes. However, the idea of discourse does not presuppose an original reality, it is itself a way that reality is
created, and since reality is only a creation, it can be recreated. Foucault in *Archaeology of Knowledge* observes: “A real subjection is born mechanically from a fictitious relation. [...] He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection.” (Foucault, “Archaeology” 202) Discourse, thus has a strain of resistance as much as it is entrenched in power structures. Just like acquiring hegemony is a method of reversing oppressive states, capturing discourse is a move towards agency. Discourse is a way reality is perceived, thus agency through discourse comes from a restructuring of meaning making systems or formulating new discourses. Sara Mills elaborates on this idea:

Foucault’s work on discourse and power is useful in helping theorists to consider the way that we know what we know; where that information comes from; how it is produced and under what circumstances; whose interests it might serve; how it is possible to think differently; in order to be able to trace the way that information that we accept as ‘true’ is kept in that privileged position. This enables us to look at the past without adopting a position of superiority – of course we know better now – in order to be able to analyze the potential strangeness of the knowledge which we take as ‘true’ at present (66).

Despite the difference in their stances towards power and resistance, the similarity between Gramsci’s idea of hegemony and Foucault’s idea of discipline—as a self-regulatory force—is quite apparent. Foucault, in his book *Discipline and Punish* (1975), for instance views the change in the system of punishment from spectacle to confinement as only a surface level peeling of the discourse of punishment:

Punishment of a less immediately physical kind, a certain discretion in the art of inflicting pain, a combination of a more subtle, more subdued sufferings, deprived of their visible display, should not this be treated as a special case, an incidental effect of deeper changes? And yet the fact remains that a few decades saw the disappearance of the tortured, dismembered, amputated body, symbolically branded on face or
shoulder, exposed alive or dead to public view. The body as the major
target of penal repression disappeared.” (Foucault, “Discipline” 8)

The idea of self regulation to evade punishment is still present in modern,
seemingly more humane punishments. The internalization of control, hence continues
to exist. Disciplining is self-regulatory and stems from some form of institutional
control, but does not necessarily need to be consistently regulated by the institutions;
hegemony, on the other hand is essentially regulated by the state. For Foucault, power
is not an overarching entity that rules from a pedestal, but something that is present in
society at several levels.

Subaltern agency involves a collective transformatory project rather than a
resistance at the individual level. The common sense that has been referred to above is
a collective common sense, something closer to ideology than to an individual
window to the world. Since the fragmentation of common sense is collective, it needs
a collective action.

The novels taken up for study evoke certain understandings of subalternity and
oppression that unfolds in several spheres of life. What the difference and similarity
between a black man’s and an Asian woman’s oppression is, how certain cultures can
be more prone to oppressive factors than others, what resistances are created between
the elite culture and the masses and how hegemonic culture operates. These and
several other questions will move towards some form of resolution in the process of
the study of these texts. The theories discussed at the outset of this chapter will help to
understand the authors’ texts in some way.

1.2 The African and Women Subalterns in Toni Morrison’s

Morrison’s imagination travels in leaps and bounds over time and space. The novels
in their different spatial and temporal settings bring out the themes of the politics of
race and feminism. Morrison’s works are deeply imbued with historical references
that strengthen her stories. John N. Duvall observes: “In Beloved, Morrison begins to
make a clearer turn to a fiction that is historiographic in the sense Linda Hutcheon has
identified as postmodern. According to Hutcheon, novels such as Beloved ‘juxtapose
what we think we know of the past (from official archival sources and personal
memory)” (ed. Duvall 120). That she sets each novel in different spaces and times is not accidental but planned. She shows us how Africans existing in different times and spaces deal with different aspects of oppression. Morrison brings to light in *Beloved* how the African history is recorded and what it actually means to the experiencing but silenced subject. Morrison is conscious of her condition as a subaltern. This consciousness and understanding help her in alleviating her subaltern status. She consequently, through her writing gives other African Americans a clearer understanding of their pasts. In speaking for herself, she has left a vocal trace for the whole race.

She develops *Beloved* around the starkly ugly and degrading act of infanticide. It is an event that she believes should not have happened but it is also an event that cannot be talked about. Sethe’s infanticide of Beloved is shrouded in silence because it evades all comprehension. Trauma unhinges her and makes her commit an act which is otherwise inconsistent with the motherly love that Sethe exudes. When Stamp Paid gives Paul D the newspaper cutting about the infanticide, Paul D refuses to believe him despite it being evident. He cannot identify Sethe in the photo: “I’m sorry Stamp. It’s a mistake somewhere ‘cause that ain’t her mouth” (Morrison, *Beloved* 186). Being a murderer he believes is inconsistent with what Sethe is. The act as it were cannot be incorporated into the corpus of Sethe’s identity. It is unassimilable for the both the experiencing and the observing subject and seems inauthentic within the normal scenario of life.

Morrison seems to have reached the understanding that oppression dehumanizes, traumatizes and creates subjects who cannot reconcile themselves with their past. This contestation of the self is marked by an inability to speak. The memory of oppression cannot be articulated because it becomes self degrading to discuss it. The very bringing of the past to consciousness rejuvenates the pain associated with it. It is however always working from within the unconscious interstices of the brain. It’s haunting might be subtle, but it is extenuating in that it ruptures the normal rhythms of one’s life. Sethe’s inference, drawn from lived experiences that spaces never die and keep on existing in memory has a close connection with the idea of haunting. Sethe tells Denver:

Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it’s gone, but the place- the picture of it- stays, and is not just in my rememor, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out
there outside my head. I mean, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened. (Morrison, Beloved 43)

Thus, the past memories may be obliterated from the consciousness but they are always there, in a hidden locked up space in the mind. The permanence of the past renders it traumatic. It cannot be left behind. The slave feels that there is no escape from trauma. This world view motivates Sethe to murder her daughter. Sethe’s act of murder ironically becomes an act of survival. She tells Paul D: “I stopped him,’ she said, staring at the place where the fence used to be. ‘I took and put my babies where they’d be safe” (Morrison, Beloved 193). Through the murder of her daughter she tries to preserve her twenty eight days of freedom forever. It is an attempt to still time. She presumes that death would help her control time and space and that she can escape slavery by selecting death over slave life. As Mary Jane Suero Elliott writes: By killing Beloved, Sethe refuses to allow her daughter to be objectified and commodified by a colonist culture. To Sethe, killing her child saves her not only from the physical suffering of slavery but also from its “measuring,” which signifies an appropriation of discourse and an oppression of black identity. Despite its protective motivation, however, Sethe’s act effectively denies her daughter the chance to live. (7)

Because of the slave’s experience of subalternity, her very ideas of death and mortality are changed. For the subaltern, death becomes a source of hope. When Paul D enquires about Baby Suggs after meeting Sethe after eighteen years, she affirms the acceptability of death and the ease of it: “Was it hard? I hope she didn’t die hard.’ Sethe shook her head. ‘Soft as cream. Being alive was the hard part.’” (Morrison, Beloved 8). Death seems to be more bearable than life in the light of slavery. Life is bearable for the subaltern because of the inevitability of death. Also, as the resurfacing of Beloved reveals in the context of this text, that death is not at all a cessation of consciousness. The existence of ghosts in the text is a metaphoric exemplification of the permanence of haunting and the etching of the traumatic memory on the mind. The ghost, in human discourse around it, is airy but it does displace and radiate something within the space that it occupies. The author, therefore, might be conveying that the consciousness that is scarred and the body that is maimed are actually unified, since the ghost also has some form of physical
presence in the world. When Sethe makes a comparison between spaces and memory, she speaks of the unity of the physical with the metaphysical.

The stark workings of slavery in *Beloved* and *A Mercy*, resonate in the mind Spivak’s earlier ideas about the permanence of subalternity. There seems to be no escape from this condition. Sethe’s life as a slave and as a free woman is traumatic and a return to normal life even after freedom is gained, seems impossible. Her liberation from slave life is only relative. The enthusiasm for life and the hope that she had had as a young woman have been extracted from her life. Paul D sees darkness in her eyes after meeting her all those years later: “Her eyes did not pick up a flicker of light. They were like two wells into which he had trouble gazing. Even punched out they needed to be covered, lidded, marked with some sign to warn folks of what that emptiness held” (Morrison, *Beloved* 10). Eyes are considered to be the passage to one’s psyche. In common parlance they are the seat of truth, while words are synonymous with ambivalence and death or deferral of meaning and truth. Also eyes are our windows to the world, both literally and metaphorically. They experience the world. The dullness of Sethe’s eyes, at the most basic level reflects the thwarting of her emotional life by her traumatic past. She keeps her traumatic past in check and that in turn makes her eyes vacant, un-experiencing, and unrevealing.

It is clear that the slave is rendered incapable of loving. The subaltern position implies the breaking up of ties to protect oneself from emotional trauma. Baby Suggs forgets the details of her children and Paul D thinks that loving was risky:

> Risky, thought Paul D, very risky. For a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love. The best thing he knew was to love just a little bit; everything just a little bit, so when they broke its back, or shoved it in a croaker sack, well maybe you’d have a little love left over for the next one. (Morrison, *Beloved* 54)

Paul D’s thinking suggests that the subaltern closes the wounds inflicted on the psyche by a simultaneous closing up of emotional life. African slaves are shorn of affinitive links by the workings of trauma on their psyches. When Baby Suggs gains freedom she realizes, for the first time the importance of living a liberated life. She had forgotten all memories of her children because they were traumatic: “It made sense for a lot of reasons because in all of Baby’s life, as well as Sethe’s own, men and women were moved around like checkers. Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone
lived, who hadn’t run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized” (Morrison, Beloved 27).

Slavery renders life ugly and hopeless. The slave, who is a carrier of traumatic memory carries a depleted psyche which cannot be cured. A symbolic understanding of Sethe’s body can throw light on the working of trauma. Sethe’s back which carries a tree of contusions can be read as a symbol of indelible suffering. The wounded back is its physical aspect, but we also know by reading the novel that the scars that Sethe has are both physical as well as mental. Sethe calls her wounds a tree but ironically it is not like a tree at all. Trees have a certain calm and accepting aura and are spaces where one can relax. But the tree of contusions on Sethe’s back is revolting and a reminder of all that is traumatic for her. Paul D observes: “Not a tree, as she had said. Maybe shaped like one, but nothing like any tree he knew because trees were inviting; things you could trust and be near; talk to if you wanted to” (Morrison, Beloved 25). Sethe’s is a passive disciplined body which carries perpetual scars of trauma. The back is stiff, unlike limbs which can move and act flexibly. The back is a passive recipient of abuse, and hence symbolizes lack of revolt. On the other hand it is also the source of skeletal and nervous strength in anatomical parlance. Therefore, metaphorically the breaking of the back is a rupturing of the source of one’s strength.

The abuse that Sethe experiences at Sweet Home through her rape when School Teacher measures her body run parallel to one another. They are both acts that debase the African through coercion and monitoring of her body. This dual power exerted over her equates with Gramsci’s idea that subalternity exists through coercion/dictatorship and hegemony. School Teacher creates a discourse around the Africans’ body to justify his actions to not just the slaves but also to himself. When Sethe after running away from Sweet Home is searched for, four men get together in the search: “When the four horsemen came—school teacher, one nephew, one slave catcher and a sheriff—the house on Bluestone Road was so quiet they thought they were too late” (Morrison, Beloved 174). In this search the policeman (who represents the power of the state) and School Teacher (who represents hegemonic discourse making agencies) come together. It can be read as a metaphor for the mutual functioning of coercion and hegemony.

Post traumatic stress is a major concern in Beloved. There are relapses into anxious feelings despite the subaltern’s efforts to fight it off. Baby Suggs relapses into madness after her brief phase of living a free life, when Sethe commits infanticide:
“Her faith, her love, her imagination and her great big old heart began to collapse twenty-eight days after her daughter-in-law arrived” (Morrison 105). The ex-slave or the slave begins to believe that the worst is not yet over, and that there is an endless possibility of more trauma happening.

Paul D’s experience of a labour prison is highly degrading. It is a blow to his self respect and his humanity. His degradation reveals to us the disciplinary functioning of prisons. This is how Paul D relates his experience of prison life: “All forty six men woke to rifle shot. All forty six. Three white men walked along the trench unlocking the doors one by one. No one stepped through. When the last lock was opened, the three returned and lifted the bare, one by one. And one by one the blackmen emerged” (Morrison, Beloved 126). Referring back to Foucault’s ideas discussed at the outset of this chapter, one can say that Paul D’s punishment at the Alberta Prison is a form of subdued torture where the mode of punishment is a disciplining through fear, and deprivation of physical needs. This is a punishment that is less immediately physical, yet inflicted torture on the prisoner’s psyche. On the contrary Sixo’s branding is a primitive form of punishment where the subject’s body is inflicted with torture. Discipline in the prison where Paul D is trapped is totalitarian. The prisoner is essentialized. Mary Paniccia Carden observes, “Completely subject to the physically weaker white guards, the prisoners occupy the abjected position of powerless women. Their feminization is graphically illustrated in the abuse they suffer” (4).

Agency in the face of oppression plays a very important role in Beloved. Despite its debilitating effect on their lives, several characters deal with the workings of post traumatic stress by averting their gaze from it, trying to get over it and engaging in endeavours that lend positivity to the psyche. A major example of this is Baby Suggs who utilizes her energies to guide the Africans in her neighbourhood. She does it not just to give meaning to others’ lives but also her own: “Who decided that, 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… she became an unchurched preacher, one who visited pulpits and opened her great heart to those who could use it” (Morrison, Beloved 102). It becomes a ritual that defines her and others’ lives. Linda Krumholz observes: “Morrison uses ritual as a model for the healing process. Rituals function as formal events in which symbolic representations—such as dance, song, story, and other
activities—are spiritually and communally endowed with the power to shape real relations in the world” (ed. Andrews and McKay 108).

Baby Suggs uses religion to counter the trauma of slavery and make sense not only of her culture, but her very body. She is in touch with the divine and through it, in touch with herself. At the same time Baby Suggs projects an image of the future, of what she wants to be. She projects an image of herself not as she was seen by the colonizer, but of how she would want to be seen: “And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face ‘cause they don’t love that either. You got to love it, you!” (Morrison, Beloved 103). This gives her pride and a providing others direction gives her purpose. Gramsci theorizes this form of agency when he says, “One’s real nature is determined by the struggle to become what one wants to become” (145).

Colonization is presented in A Mercy differently from the way it is presented in Beloved. A Mercy is set in the brutal landscape of America in the seventeenth century when the new migrants were trying to make a fortune for themselves, particularly by farming, which depended on exporting goods and importing slaves. In A Mercy, there are references to the “people’s war” and the rules that came after it. These laws were in favour of the whites and ironically: “authorized chaos in defense of order. By eliminating manumission, gatherings, travel and bearing arms for black people only; by granting license to any white to kill any black for any reason; by compensating owners for a slave’s maiming or death, they separated and protected all whites from all others forever.” (Morrison, “Mercy” 8). Morrison in A Mercy goes back to a pre-slavery stage to show us that there were other possibilities in America’s cultural evolution than slavery. Harris observes:

At the end, A Mercy represents what the new nation could have done and what the maturing country could have become. Morrison shows the reader the shaky beginnings of the plantation economy that sustained and is sustained by the institution of slave labor. It seems to have been a loose recreation of old country serfdom with the addition of racism as a convenient justification for an economic system designed to be driven by free labor, designed to maintain a ruling class, designed to divide the labor classes, and destined to be oppressive. We
see the violent ending of this institution in Morrison’s novel *Beloved*, where this slave-octracy weakened by its own corrupt nature is finally pulled apart by the ravages of war. (7)

The slave system in *A Mercy* has not yet become brutal and the puritanical religious views motivate the colonizer to be merciful to the slaves. There are, however, slave masters like D’Ortega who are unjust to their slaves. Slavery and the very idea of the American Dream have not yet ripened and are still in their infancy. On the other hand, in *Beloved* slavery has become a direr business and the master has been largely corrupted. Harris observes in this regard:

Thus freedom as we understand it in the 20th century was something quite different in the colonial mind. There was a perception of freedom among the landed gentry that was associated with religion, class and gender that had very little to do with race or national origin. There was the expectation that there would always be a servant class similar to European serfdom. And there was no tradition in place allowing freedom to women of any class. (6)

The very life of the African slave derives meaning from her/his labour. Outwardly there is nothing economical in his body, which gains value only when it is put to work: “Unlike a snake or a bear, a dead nigger could not be skinned for profit and was not his own dead weight in coin” (Morrison, “Mercy” 174). The degradation of the subaltern is normal and acceptable and hence is not seen by the oppressor. The subaltern must reach extremes of degradation to be seen. Sethe’s suffering at Sweet Home goes unrecorded because it is seen as a normal part of a slave’s life. When she commits infanticide, however, it is recorded in the newspaper:

Because there was no way in hell a black face could appear in a newspaper if the story was about something anybody wanted to hear. A whip of fear broke through the heart chambers as soon as you saw a Negro’s face in a paper, since the face was not there because the person had a healthy baby, or outran a street mob. Nor was it there because the person had been killed, or maimed or caught or burned or jailed or whipped or evicted or stomped or raped or cheated, since that could hardly qualify as news in a newspaper. It would have to be something out of the ordinary. (Morrison, *Beloved* 183)
In *A Mercy* religion is shown to be a source of hegemony that controls the commoners. The power of religion over the citizens of the Presbyterian state of America rests on disciplining the subject by interpreting it as God’s will. Religion dictates, for example, that the native Americans discard their deer skin clothes and wear what the Presbyterians want them to wear. Religion in *A Mercy* has a peculiar way of identifying all people who are not white or who are not the norm as being evil. Christianity controls the body of Daughter Jane who has a squint in the eye. Religious people of the village subject her to brutal beatings because they think she is possessed by the devil. When these people see Florens, her blackness is also taken to be a sign of possession. Before they can exorcise her, they examine her body parts to find any other deviance from the norm. When Florens asks Daughter Jane if she is a demon, she replies that she is. She has lost her identity and started to believe what the colonizer wants her to believe. How else can she account for her suffering? Both Florens and Daughter Jane are seen as less than human.

It is viable to refer back to Gramsci’s concept of the mutual functioning of coercion and hegemony to understand how religion works as an aide to colonization. Ann E. Harris points out in this regard, “The colonial mission seemed to most who engaged in it to be a benign, if not positive endeavor, in which colonialists were taught to believe that the seizure of wealth and land was justified by the gift of religion and civilization. Land grabbing was part of the religious mission” (4).

Religion, despite being a carrier of the colonial impulse, is accepted by the people because it completes their fractured identities. Morrison writes about Lina’s acceptance of Christianity, “Afraid of once more losing shelter, terrified of being alone with the world without family, Lina accepted her status as heathen and let herself be purified by these worthies” (Morrison, “Mercy” 46).

Blacksmith also becomes a symbol of control in *A Mercy* especially in the case of Florens. She ceases to be responsible for her life and makes him a drive that operates on her being. Stephanie Mueller observes: “But to give up responsibility for oneself — even under conditions that *per se* deprive one of this responsibility — and to reject choice is to ultimately refuse agency. The danger inherent in such a refusal is the lesson that Florens’s mother longs to give her child; it is the realization that the refusal to face choice (the affirmation of agency) is slavery” (77).
Florens, despite being the narrator of her story both as the novel’s narrative voice and as the writer of her story on the walls of Jacob’s home, cannot know her world in totality. Her world is limited and she can only understand it in a narrow sense. She has a very limited and traditional view of the world. She possesses, in Gramscian terminology, only “common sense” or a surface level conception of the world. For instance, she cannot understand Jacob’s act of mercy as her mother does and rather misunderstands her mother for having disowned her. Stephanie Mueller writes:

The origin of Florens’s misreading of her mother’s action lies in the very nature of the categories Florens applies to the world. Because she lives in a world that overrules kinship with property claims, that is, transforms kinship into property ties, she fails to see her mother’s predicament. She thinks of belonging in terms of ownership, because unlike the blacksmith she has no alternative ancestral framework available to guide her. (76)

Naming and renaming become central to creating absence and culling out presence. The characterizing of the subaltern as a case study, involves an imposition of a title in place of her sense of personal identity. The giving of a title is simultaneous to the consequent removal of a name. The marking of the subaltern with a title is a dehumanizing act, an act affirming their non-self. In *A Mercy* Sorrow is named as such because of her seeming ominous presence. When she renames herself “Complete” after the birth of her daughter she has shed not just a title but also the connotations of identity that it carried.

*A Mercy* traces another aspect of slavery that is more humane. The novel is impregnated with horrific facts of slavery but it constitutes certain hopes for the subalterns too. One observes that even within the colonial space the one in superior position can act mercifully and humanely. On the contrary, a free black man can act like an oppressor and patriarch. Shirley A. Stave and Justin Tally write that in *A Mercy* Toni Morrison goes on to explore, “not simply race issues, but those of gender, religion, geography, among many other, and doing so in ways that engage in an interface with a host of cultural artifacts and foundational myths” (1).

There is an immutable stratification of society, perpetrated by religion and other social formations that validate oppression through an authoritative voice coming
from above. However, even the most oppressed individuals show traces of resistance through disaggregation, scattering past the borders of domination and an avowal of their hybridity. Stave and Tally write: “while Sorrow, through motherhood, and Lina, through her identification with nature, are able to overcome their orphaned status. It is Florens, however, who makes a spiritual journey to identity that is empowering and liberating” (Stave and Tally 4).

Morrison uses the elements of folklore in *A Mercy* which is especially apparent in Lina’s story of the birds who survive the madness of human greed. In *Beloved*, folklore is apparent in the songs sung by Paul D when the trauma of slavery becomes too difficult for him to assimilate. Marcus Green’s observations on Gramsci’s understanding of folklore can be useful in interpreting Morrison. He points out, “Gramsci’s discussions of common sense often appear alongside his discussions of folklore… ‘Folklore’, he writes, ‘must not be considered an eccentricity, an oddity or a picturesque element, but as something that is very serious and is to be taken seriously’” (13). Like folklore, writing about life is a way of contextualizing and understanding situations and processes that operate in oppression. Morrison writes literature to understand slavery and to give voice to the unspoken of and silenced multitudes of African slaves and their descendants. She writes stories which have hitherto been suppressed or unwritten, in the process talking about trauma and tabooed voices of slave life.

Toni Morrison thus bares trauma and oppression not simply as an act of remembering but as an act of undoing it. J. Brooks Bouson writes, “While in Morrison’s novels we find evidence of the desire to bear witness to the shame and trauma that exist in the lives of African Americans, in Morrison’s insistent aestheticizing of shame and violence, we also find evidence of the reactive desire to cover up or repair the racial wounds she has exposed” (ed. Bloom 125). Morrison’s African American characters are traumatized by the colonizer. Tan’s characters are also women diasporics, who however, face a different form of oppression than Morrison’s characters.

Tan’s women characters can be categorized on the basis of space and time into women living in China, first generation migrants and second generation migrants to America. Morrison traces a trajectory from oppression and rejection to articulation and agency, which is also a central concern in Tan’s novels.
1.3 Amy Tan’s Asian Subaltern Women – Female and Diasporic – in *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) and *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* (2001)

Tan throws light on the lives of primarily women subalterns in traditional and modern social settings or native and western cultures. There is an interaction between various levels of women subalterns like girl children, widows and orphans. Her novels draw a link between these spatially and temporally diverse characters whose reactions to their subalternity are varied. In this regard Zenobia Mistri summarizes the spatial thrust of the novel’s various tales: “*The Joy Luck Club* works spatially rather than temporally. We discover pieces of the mothers’ childhoods in China as well as read their individual stories; we see the breach in the daughters’ relationships with their mothers” (ed. Bloom 46).

The experience of subalternity results in a disruption of subjectivity. It is through the infringements of oppression on an individual’s subjectivity that subalternity is experienced. Even as a child bride, Lindo Jong in *The Joy Luck Club* understands her divided identity. Her family treats her as if she belongs to someone else and in her new home she is treated as an outsider. In her new home even the servants consider her with contempt. However, in Tan’s works there is nothing like absolute power. People are only relatively powerful. Huang Taitai may be more powerful than her daughter-in-law, but she cannot get the guests to come to her son’s wedding because the war would not let them come out of their homes. Thus, power exists in a system of hierarchies. This hierarchy is present even among children. Ying-Ying in “The Moon Lady” gets to sit in a shady place while her half sisters sit in the sun because she is the eldest. Also, the two half sisters are nameless and referred to in the story as Number Two and Number Three. Clearly, they have been dehumanized because of no natural flaw of their own. They are ordinary humans, but the culture imposed on them gives them an identity that operates through a sort of labeling, defining and stratifying them in a system of power operations.

Bao Bomu’s scarred face is a result of her initial defeat against patriarchal norms. Scars are also symbolically resonant with her disciplining by outside forces. At the same time she has also accepted her disciplining. In this sense, she is controlled hegemonically and by consent. She has internalized this control which leads her to committing suicide. Towards the end of her life, however, she writes her
autobiography. All throughout her life, she has been telling her daughter false tales about her past. This is the first time she speaks authentically about her life. Her life’s story helps change the lives of her daughter, LuLing and grand-daughter Ruth. They are motivated by her perseverance in the face of oppressive circumstances, and how she survives in a household where she is unwanted.

Bao Bomu and LuLing in *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* are treated with contempt by the whole family. They are an unwanted burden and hence are otherized, just like LuLing and Ruth are otherized by LuLing’s in-laws because Ruth is a girl and is not a carrier of family genes or legacy. The factors of family economy and gendered identity collude in the oppression of women. When young LuLing, goes for a meeting with her prospective mother-in-law, she is subjected to excruciating observation and all this while she is expected to be docile. She knows that a girl is expected to marry to improve her social status. She is dependent on a strange family to improve her status, and has no choice in her own marriage:

> During all these discussions, I did not ask if my future husband was smart, if he was educated, if he was kind. I did not think about romantic love. I knew nothing of that. But I did know that marriage had to do with whether I improved my station in life or made it worse. And to judge by the Chang’s manners and the jewelry the Chang wife wore, I too, was about to become a more important person. What could be wrong with that? (Tan, “The Joy Luck” 212)

There are certain features that are ascribed to women by patriarchy. Tan erases such generalizations of women’s roles and behavior. She shows through her characters that women too can be outgoing and thinking individuals. But at the same time she also explicates through the characters that these features make men uncomfortable. In the first chapter of *The Joy Luck Club*, Suyuan Woo is said to have an idea before she dies, “My father thinks she was killed by her own thoughts. ‘She had a new idea inside her head,’ said my father. But before it could come out of her mouth, the thought became too big and burst. It must have been a very bad idea” (Tan, “The Joy Luck” 19). Is Tan hinting here that women must articulate what they think as a survival strategy in a masculine world? M. Marie Booth Foster writes about the act of giving voice, “*The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God’s Wife* are studies in balance- balancing hyphenation and the roles of daughter, wife, mother, sister, career woman. In achieving balance, voice is important: in order to achieve voice,
hyphenated women must engage in self exploration, recognition and appreciation of their culture(s)” (ed. Bloom 18). Women must analyze their existence and voice their experiences and needs to become self reliant individuals.

The loss of voice and articulation in Ruth results from trauma. She, however moulds this into a meaningful ritual. She cannot otherwise control the onset of her voicelessness, but can nevertheless give it some meaning. Ruth, even unknowingly is related to her mother and grand-mother. When she loses her voice for the first time she establishes a connection with her grand-mother who inhabits another world. Her voicelessness is defined by Xiumei Pu in the following terms:

Actually, the Chi/Ori or ghost of Ruth’s grandmother has never left Ruth. However, being merged in an American environment, Ruth is not aware of the presence of her grandmother’s spirit as its presence is silent. Ruth’s chronic loss of voice each year is a mystic sign of her grandmother’s presence. Ruth’s temporary muteness every year is not only a metaphor of Ruth’s own silence but also alludes to the permanent silence of her grandmother. The relation between Ruth and the ghost of her grandmother, Liu Xin, is like body and soul. Being a spirit, Liu Xin is formless, invisible, and silent. (19)

The idea of voice is important in Tan’s novels. Ruth gives voice to the voiceless as a ghost writer, Jing-Mei gives voice to her mother’s search, and the diasporics give voice to their native selves. M. Marie Booth Foster writes about the idea of voice and its importance in Tan’s The Bonesetter’s Daughter and The Kitchen God’s Wife: “In Tan’s fiction, the daughters’ sense of self is intricately linked to an ability to speak and be heard by the mothers. Similarly, the mothers experience growth as they broaden communication lines with their daughters” (ed. Bloom 17).

Just as control over one’s voice is a means of agency, the meetings of the Joy Luck Club are for the women characters ways of coming to terms with their exploitation. It is their way of reviving hope, and fighting free of the oppressor’s stranglehold over their lives. This is a way women make their own organizations to fight bad times. In Gramscian philosophy too, making alliances is the first step towards agency. 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)

America is seen in *The Joy Luck Club* as not just a contemplated haven but a place that gives them more than just safety. It gives them a culture and experiences that are at war with the experiences they bring with them from China. When Suyuan reaches America, she is given American dresses to wear that are too large for her because they are made with American women in mind. In the first American thing she gets, she is already disadvantaged. She also joins the English learning classes but she understands that she has a past and hopes which cannot be expressed in English. She is experientially disconnected from the English language. The absence of language skills also increases the rift between mothers and daughters. It is as if their differing understandings of life are modeled on differences in languages. Steven P. Sondrup writes:

Some of the most obvious misunderstandings between the immigrant mothers and those around them have to do with their less than complete mastery of English. Language difficulties have long been part of the caricature of Chinese Americans in American popular culture and take place on many levels. Direct quotations of the mothers’ speech are often unidiomatic in English but fully reveal the Chinese syntax lying just below the surface. (ed. Bloom 38)

Language is also the missing link between the daughters and China. The syntax of Chinese language is lost to the daughters who only have a second hand knowledge of the Chinese culture. And yet a part of the daughters is Chinese, so much so that when Waverly is to go to China for her second honeymoon she fears that she will blend in with the Chinese. But her mother tells her that she would stand out and would not be recognized as a Chinese but as an American and would be considered an outsider. Waverly’s connection to America has already been affirmed metaphorically too since her naming because she is named after the street her family lived in. She continues to have a double face, as her mother says, one Chinese and the other American.
Girls are taught several ways of behaving and several times these impositions come through other women, particularly through their mothers. They are taught certain ways of behaving. These include, nurturing particular talents which they have no affinity with. Sometimes these restrictive ways taught to them also become ways of alleviating their oppression as women; Waverly is elated by her nurturing the talent of playing chess.

A patriarchal symbol in *The Bonesetters’ Daughter* is the Peking Man. “Peking Man” is actually an umbrella term for the several skeletons of early men, women and children which were found in caves near Peking. This over arching masculine term implies the general invisibility of women in history and the denial of space to them. Spatially close to these caves is the orphanage where LuLing resides with other orphan girls. This, on the contrary is a space where young girls exert their agency. Metaphorically, the patriarchal and oppressive norms bring in their stead some form of resistance from women.

The act of drowning in Ying-Ying’s story in *The Joy Luck Club* is symbolic disciplining. The child is taught the idea of gaining an authorization for her actions. Drowning is a metaphorical coming to terms with one’s infirmity and absence in a starkly physical sense. The physicality of oppression is structured into the narrative through the image of decorating the body as a form of disciplining. On the festival day, Ying-Ying is dressed in special clothes not only to show her position but also to please the gods who are also a source of authority:

That day, instead of dressing me in a light cotton jacket and loose trousers. Amah brought out a heavy, yellow silk jacket and skirt outlined with black bands, “‘No time to play today,’ said Amah opening the lined jacket. ‘Your mother has made you new tiger clothes for the moon festival…’ she lifted me into the pants. ‘Very important day and now you are a big girl, so you can go to the ceremony.’” (Tan, “The Joy Luck” 69)

When Ying-Ying spoils her clothes, it is akin to breaking the plain order of patriarchy. However, being at a lower position as a female and as a child she feels guilty and scared:

It was not until then, too late, that I saw my new clothes- and the spots of bloods, flecks of fish scales, bits of feathers and mud… And this is what I truly thought: that I could cover these spots by painting my
clothes crimson red, and that if I stood perfectly still no one would notice this change. (Tan, “The Joy Luck” 76)

Disciplining is important in the patriarchal discourse and in religious discourse and try to control the actions of their subjects. This conditioning has women as both its carriers and victims. The obedience to authority is almost a second nature of the older generation of females brought up in China; their daughters born in America, however, are more resistant to control and disciplining agencies. This throws light on not only the cultural difference between the east and the west, but on a more complex level is the difference that exists because of varying economic developments and the freedom that comes with them. Race and class, then, become intrinsically linked because they feed on one another. This idea is furthered later in the book where the Chinese pagodas are located in the poorest of American neighbourhoods. Also, the initial Chinese migrants to America are not only racially disadvantaged, but their racial disadvantage is linked up with their economic disadvantage that makes them live in poor neighbourhoods.

Both economic disadvantage and age become factors in generating powerlessness. An-Mei, when a child, is told that her dying clothes will be plain, the mourning time will be short and the funeral will be small because she is only a child. Surveillance that Lindo Jong is subjected to by Huang Taitai is both based on her age and lower economic status as compared to the economic and social position of her suitor’s family:

And this is when Huang Taitai looked down at me with a cloudy face as though she could penetrate my thoughts and see my future intensions. I will never forget her look. Her eyes opened wide, she searched my face carefully and then she smiled. I could see a large gold tooth staring at me like the blinding sun and then the rest of the teeth opened wide as if she was going to swallow me down in one piece.” (Tan, “The Joy Luck” 50)

The one in a subaltern position is the one under observation and is judged in accordance with the rules of behavior set by those in power. From a diasporic perspective, there are the truths of the two competing homelands – China and America. The diasporic condition is a condition of confusion. Ruth and the other second generation women in the two novels are confused beings. Ruth is perpetually
confused in her marriage. Steven P. Sondrup in his essay on *The Joy Luck Club* observes:

Immigration as a social phenomenon presents a complex array of divided loyalties, hierarchies, and systems of reference. In the case of immigrants themselves, marginalization of many different kinds is a complicated and often deeply disorienting experience. On the one hand the immigrant feels varying degrees of alienation in the new culture… On the other hand, the immigrant also experiences an alienation from the home culture as well. (ed. Bloom 35)

The diasporic feels that she exists at the margins of society and feels an intense pull to both adopt the Western culture as her own, as well as to retain the native culture in her abode in the West. In *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, Ruth is a confused diasporic. Due to this confusion, she does not understand her mother until she reads her translated autobiography. Reading the autobiography is like revisiting a place that was hitherto only a far, hazy, foreign locale. It is an experience of accepting other truths which might not be immediate to Ruth’s American identity, but form a part of it nevertheless. Her identity becomes more complete because her Chinese heritage, that she feels was an irrational, uncalled for imposition on her identity, now becomes an essential part of it. Similarly when Jing Mei goes to China to fulfill her mother’s wishes, she feels she has overcome her rigidity regarding her Chinese past and reentered a part of her history, which completes her. Agency for the diasporic comes from finding and accepting her other concealed other, native self.

Native cultures are often undermined, obscured or hybridized in the process of colonization, by forcing the subaltern to mimic colonial culture or wearing masks that are foreignized versions of their true skin. Fortune cookies which are considered a Chinese gift to America do not contain Chinese sayings at all. They are Americanized and are misrepresentations of the Chinese fortune telling. Tan writes, “‘They are fortunes,’ she explained. ‘American people think Chinese people write these sayings.’/ ‘But we never say such things!’ I said. ‘These things don’t make sense. These are not fortunes, they are bad instructions’” (Tan 262).

Similarly, Suyuan Woo in *The Joy Luck Club* says that her Mah Jong table was made of “a very fragrant red wood, not what you call rosewood, but hong mu, which is so fine, there is no English word for it.” This expresses the inadequacy of English to articulate the Chinese experience. Linguistic inability becomes
powerlessness in understanding the self, in the novel. When LuLing passes on to Ruth, her memoir written in Chinese, Ruth is unable to read it for months together because she is not well-versed in Chinese. It remains buried in her study for months. It is as if an important part of her remains tucked into a corner of her busy life. This memoir contains facts that can give relative closure to the confused life that Ruth leads.

Hegemony involves a comprehensive containment of meaning or an ordering of it. Power involves a structuring of the very language, and enforces a meaning onto it. It is as if language contains meaning. The subaltern must realize that language cannot contain meaning because it is only a mask that meaning wears. Language is ubiquitous but not universal. Since language is not universal, constantly evolving in time and space, and exists in personal and socio-culturally determined registers, it can be used to configure new meanings. For the subaltern to reinvent agency, she must understand that language does not contain meaning.

Language in *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, becomes an essential trope of making meaning of oppression, memory and subjectivity. It exists as a link between individuals. Ruth, who is a ghostwriter, is a sort of surrogate mother to the books she helps write. She translates the thoughts of authors into appropriate language. Her theory of language, however, remains raw as is revealed by a conversation between her and her boyfriend, Art. When Ruth meets Art for the first time, they discuss language. Art is a language expert of American Sign Language and hence both Ruth and he are in a way translators. However, while Art is conscious of the general importance of language, for Ruth language is limited to its professional use by her. When Art asks Ruth what her favourite word was, she realizes that she had never dwelt on such an apparent question.

In *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, the concern for language surfaces repeatedly and is important to how Tan understands subalternity. One feature of language is its importance in understanding and relating to culture, in that it is one of our links to it. Linguistic objects exist in correlation, as fluid entities and are dependent on each other for obtaining meaning. The relational character of language becomes clear as Tan narrates the process of Ruth’s writing. She defines words in her books by making perceptibly far-fetched comparisons. The fluidity of language and its double meanings
become clear from a conversation between Ruth and Agapi when she discusses with her, how to define the word “cosmology” in the book that she is writing:

“We should define cosmology here,” she heard herself say, “perhaps in a sidebar. We don’t want people to think we are talking about cosmetics or astrology.”

“Yes, yes, excellent point, my dear. Cosmology, let’s see… what we believe, subconsciously, implicitly, or both, how the universe works— you want to add something? (Tan, “The Bonesetter’s” 43)

Language can be exploited to impress on the oppressed, an identity, a way of thinking and a way of life. Conversely, the subaltern can use language to define herself and create a counter understanding of her experiences. It is as if the subject of language becomes the god of his world and rejects the realities of the world for the satisfaction that s/he finds herself responsible for. Story telling that becomes an important way of dealing with oppression comes about through language. Language, therefore, has to be moulded by the subject to express herself authentically and in a way that allows her to come to terms with her oppression and become an agent.

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. This act of wish fulfilment 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, a critic, 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)

Tan, in The Bonesetter’s Daughter situates the stories of Ruth and her mother LuLing in a concomitant rather than sequential fashion to establish a holistic picture of subalternity as not simply some sort of pre-democratic or colonial eventuality, but as something that inheres life processes. Tan focuses on the marginal spaces which the subaltern inhabits. The understanding of history is an integral part of making sense of the present. LuLing seems, throughout the first part of the novel as a feeble, irritated Chinese woman who seems to be living an ordinary but incomplete life. Ruth
feels about LuLing, “That’s how her mother had always been, difficult, oppressive, and odd. And in exactly that way LuLing had loved her” (Tan, “The Bonesetter’s” 59). However, the incomplete image of LuLing takes on a closure as her story is revealed. She becomes a strong, admirable lady who has led an exceptional life.

The subaltern must reclaim her agency by asserting her presence. The reclaiming of identity is like an unearthing of the crypt. The absent or missing self is found and formed to become an agent. Agency is a culling out of a presence from absence and not a simple nullification of absence. Agency lies symbolically in the bones which give shape to one’s body and hence are metaphoric of strength in the Chinese culture; as Xiumei Pu observes:

“The title, The Bonesetter’s Daughter, signifies the Chinese-American daughter’s identification with her Chinese ancestry. The word bone read as gu in Chinese is a pun in the Chinese language. It not only refers to the physical structure of the human body but also the metaphorical connotation of gu chi, meaning character and courage. (48)

Finding oneself is a way of survival because it involves a revelation of the hidden, or the obscured. 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. 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 hers 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.
These are not masochistic acts as they might seem on a cursory glance, but are ways of exercising control over one’s life. It is not a punishment to the self, but a rejuvenation of it. Patriarchy, however imposes punishment of women to control them. One such punishment is banishing from social setups, the dissenting or revolutionary female who does not adhere to social mores. This negatively motivates women and regulates their behavior to acquiesce to social norms in order to avoid punishment. Several of Tan’s characters evade these rules, one among these being Bao Bomu who marries for love in a time when it was unacceptable in Chinese society.

The idea of natural selection and survival of the fittest runs through the novels of Amy Tan as it does in Morrison’s and Gurnah’s novels. The second section of the *The Joy Luck Club* starts with an anecdote which makes clear the importance of self protection in survival. Later in “Rules of the Game” Waverly is taught restraint. Even when Waverly plays chess she learns survival strategies. Other strategies that the Chinese characters link to survival are superstitious beliefs: “It was her chang, a small tablet of red jade which held the Sun’s fire. “Is luck.” She whispered and tucked it into my dress pocket” (Tan, “The Joy Luck” 96). Passing on memory and belongings, thus becomes a survival strategy in that it is an agentive act of reclaiming culture and history.

Agency comes about for the strong women characters in her texts through their will and the control they exert over their lives despite the restrictions in the outside world. Somehow they find in their limited lives, responses to the overt pressures that help them in moulding their lives to suit their needs. Particularly in the case of *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, Gro Mary Liland writes:

One might say that in Precious Auntie Tan has created a character that is not only strong and righteous but who also could be compared to Fa Mulan, the legendary Chinese swordswoman. In fact all the Chinese women found in the text in the Chinese setting are strong characters, and in making them so Amy Tan demonstrates her ethnic pride and speaks back to the American feminist movement whose supporters have a picture of Chinese women as the Other. (62)

Tan’s texts have characters who live many lives which get linked together. Sometimes they respond to their oppression from within the oppressed space and modify the very space to meet their need for agency and freedom. Tan’s two texts are
primarily about women seeking a voice. The various characters try to understand their inner life that is set against the backdrop of a patriarchal society. Voice is closely related to language which is a central concern in *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*. LuLing and Ruth both struggle for voicing their histories and understanding their selfhood. In *The Joy Luck Club*, the several mothers and daughters tell disparate tales that are set in different times and spaces. The daughters find it difficult to understand and imagine their mothers’ Chinese pasts. The mothers on the other hand are far-sighted and wise and can understand what is missing in their daughters’ lives. There is a hopeful reconciliation of the psyches of the mothers and daughters, however, towards the end of the texts.

**1.4 Layers of Subalterns in Gurnah’s *Paradise* (1994) and *Desertion* (2005)**

Like Morrison and Tan, one of Gurnah’s major concerns is that of the control the colonizer exerts over the subaltern. However, unlike Morrison and Tan, Gurnah’s characters find themselves deserted and extricated from social ties. They understand the complexities of subaltern existence and face them on their own. Gurnah’s *Desertion* and *Paradise* have layers of themes that range from philosophical queries regarding freedom, ethics and the idea of paradise, to political questions about the workings of imperialism and other forms of oppression. How subalternity originates and affects the colonized subject are the main concerns foregrounded by these queries. Gurnah seeks to give the reader an experience of how subalterns are created. Both *Paradise* and *Desertion* try to answer this question in multiple ways.

In Gurnah’s texts, the reader finds two kinds of control – the control that is a hindrance to the growth of the controlled and the control that is necessary for growth. The control of the family or the laws of a democracy are essential for growth. Ultimate freedom is not possible; freedom and agency both have natural borders. Ultimate freedom means freedom from everything including death, which is practically speaking, impossible. Yusuf’s father warns him against going too far from home or making friends with certain boys. This control is essential for his safety and growth. The control of his parents is Yusuf’s first encounter with control that he will
be subjected to all his life, till one day when he really comes of age and leaves his captor's house, expressing his subjectivity.

Yusuf as a young boy waits for uncle Aziz’s coin when he is visiting their home. The giving of the coin is not a simple ritual. It is a trope for controlling them. If Aziz actually cared for them, he would not take Yusuf away from his parents. The coin is one of his ways of silencing them into obedient helplessness. Aziz in Anne Ajulu Okungu’s view is a silent authoritarian figure. His authority becomes apparent through his economic control over his slaves and wives. Okungu writes:

Aziz in *Paradise* is silent in the background but actively perpetrates violence against the other characters. His slaves and his wives feel his presence even in his absence because of the structures within which he confines them. The two boys Khalil and Yusuf, are slaves and they are confined to a space that helps to define their servitude. The same applies to the wives who are confined to the house. Although they are able to speak about their condition, they do so through a subdued, passive voice, a voice that does not get them out of the oppressive situation. (40)

Another form of control is also the control of humans over nature. The garden is a symbol of this control and the ordering of landscapes is symbolic of the ordering of humans. Yusuf’s life is ordered by Aziz and Yusuf, in turn, orders the garden. Gurnah seems to be hinting that the colonizer is not an ultimate colonizer and the subject is not an ultimate subject. They are subjects and masters only relatively and there is much scope for the interchange of positions. This interchange of positions occurs when the savages take Aziz and his troupe hostage and make them subjects.

The first chapter of Gurnah’s *Paradise* is named “The Walled Garden”; here the emphasis is as much on the word “walled” as on “garden”. The paradise that Yusuf will find in the garden will be, nevertheless, never his. He will still be a captive in this garden since it belongs to his captor Aziz. Walls also suggest divisions. The novel brings to light various divisions in the society; those of race, class, gender and sanity, focusing, always on the difference between what is normal and what is abnormal. What exists on this side of the wall is acceptable, while on the ‘other’ side exists the savage, prohibited, unknown and unacceptable.

The abnormal is anything that cannot be ordinarily explained in a society that often targets the powerless as abnormal. The beggar Mohammed who is a friend of
Yusuf’s is taken to be insane (since he is not ordinary) and subjected to torture to cure his madness. These remedies are a direct attack on his subjectivity; not only do they target his psyche but also control and corrode his body. He says, “‘They took me for mad! Can you believe that? There they had filled his mouth with salt and slapped him in the face if he tried to spit it out.’ They had only given him peace if he sat quietly while the rocks of salt melted in his mouth and corroded his guts” (Gurnah, Paradise 10).

Abnormality, one realizes, is only on the surface. It is only a state that is defined culturally and has no universal defining features. Thus there is no ultimate abnormality; it is only a matter of seeing and becoming. Yusuf’s mother tells him that there exist stories about sultans, prophets and wise people who sometimes disguise themselves as mendicants to know about the world. What was considered right and wrong is not dictated by morality but a deeper code that seeks to control the actions of humans. It is a way of order making.

In Desertion, there are stark comparisons between beasts and humans. It is, as if, humans become civilized only in comparison to animals. When Amin indulges in romantic relations with Jamila who is considered degraded by society, his father compares his actions with that of a beast: “You ruin your life as if you have no head to think with. As if no one has ever taught you anything or given you an idea of what is right and what is wrong. As if you’re nothing more than a beast, without feeling, without respect for yourself or for anyone else” (Gurnah, Paradise 202).

Then, there is the comparison between Pearce and monsters, right in the beginning of Desertion because Hassanali finds him close to death at a time and place that only ghosts inhabit. The Germans are compared to phantoms. The religion of the natives and their traditions are ridiculed and the stories about the natives that run in the common discourse are highly abrasive. Khalil talks of the wolf men creating fearful stories about them. Since he is awed by them and does not have clear knowledge of them, he sees them in all things that seem mysterious to him. On seeing a white man, he thinks that it is the wolf man. This similarity is further elaborated when Khalil says that a wolf man is to be avoided because they turn one into animals or slaves. Anything unwanted and odd is labeled as evil, like the mythical wolf-men. The fishermen whom Yusuf meets also demonize the undefined creatures in the sea. They talk of them as visitations and ghosts; this being their way of coming to terms with danger. When Uncle Aziz’z troupe goes to Chatu’s village in the forest, they are
unwanted and hence represent evil. They are considered evil because merchants who had come before them to the village had turned out to be cheats. Thus evil takes on additional meanings that are not limited to the idea of morality.

There are postcolonial concerns in Desertion. One among these is how the natives are perceived in debilitating ways by the colonizer. The native is made a subaltern by virtue of the Western discourse that sees her as a limited sort of being. Eric Falk observes:

The English operate with a more stable racialised – and racist – understanding of the local socio-cultural dynamics. Turner is acquainted with Richard Burton, and their discussions bring out their differing attitudes as to the possibility of educating the African population both men regard as existing on the margin of humanity. (Falk 54)

The consciousness of her inferiority is ingrained in the native’s mind through the hegemony exercised by the colonizer. Even when Hassanali rescues the white man and saves his life, he is unable to see himself as a saviour and a hero. The qualities of the hero are, in fact conferred on the feeble, diseased white man who is on the verge of death. Hassanali feels both overwhelmed and awed by the white man. His feelings of inferiority are evident when he thinks that his house is inappropriate for housing him:

But this guest was a different thing altogether. A European, mzungu. What were they going to do with a European? Where were they going to put him? He should have let Hamza have him. Hamza had empty rooms in his house, and the wealth and and furnishings to make the mzungu comfortable. They only had two rooms and Hassanali would have to share his room with him. (Gurnah, Desertion 22)

In Paradise too, Aziz’s domination over Yusuf and Khalil works through making them believe that they are inferior to him. Khalil has imbibed this notion and tells Yusuf that Aziz is not his uncle as he thinks, but his master.

Yusuf’s first encounter with a white man that is at a railway station is psychologically debilitating; the white man bares his teeth in an involuntary snarl and clenches his fists at Yusuf, simply because Yusuf cannot stop staring at him. This sheds light on the inhumanity of the colonizer. A white man is not supposed to have an ethnicity because white is the norm while people of colour are a category that
needs cleansing, civilizing, bleaching, adapting and learning. At this threat from the white man, Yusuf starts praying, showing that the native’s turning to God is a survival strategy when s/he cannot interpret the world around and inside of herself or himself.

Rehana, in *Desertion*, becomes practically asocial when she renounces the social mores and curbs her value system to accept the law of her body and her psychological need for a companion. However, she ends up leaving behind her a story and generations of ostracized women who are born in her family. She is extricated from the family by her brother and from social relations by community.

Did the affair result in a quarrel between Rehana and Hassanali? It must have done. He must have berated her for losing all sense of what is proper or bearable. He must have ranted at her for all the embarrassment she had brought on him. He must have suspected that she had lost her mind…Rehana Zakariya and Martin Pearce became lovers… She lived with him in an apartment he rented in a leafy district near where the hospital is now, which was where Europeans lived at the time. (Gurnah *Desertion* 119)

Rehana’s story of trespassing social structure – that hampered her growth and independence – remains unknown to historical recording. It is a micro history which is never reported or recorded despite the fact that it marks a strong break from patriarchal stranglehold. Rashid records it when he writes a research paper on her act of dissent.

Unlike Rehana who creates her subjectivity through a revolt to the existing social order, Mzee Hamdani in *Paradise* becomes a sort of ascetic and withdraws from concerns of identity. He accepts life as a solid fact within which he has to live contentedly, not thinking about the fact that contentment cannot be got in the conditions of his oppressed existence. He misinterprets his acculturation and surrender, as an act of freedom. Freedom, we understand in *Paradise*, is never a passive act, it cannot be reduced to a belief because it is something that must be experienced. Mzee Hamdani tells Yusuf:

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 the rain, or the setting of the sun at the end
of the day. The following morning the sun will rise again whether the
like it or not. The same with freedom. (Gurnah, Paradise 223)

Mzee Hamdani is a passive disciplined body who purports an inauthentic idea
of freedom. He has given in to power and denies his powerlessness. Yusuf, on the
other hand, refuses to be passive and controlled from outside. His journey is one of
development from powerlessness to relative power. He is initially confused but
through his subjective efforts, the haziness in his thoughts gradually gives way to
clarity in understanding his situation in the world.

An important concern in Desertion is the complexity of power struggles in a
postcolonial world. Instead of an organization of democratic societies, the freed
nations often disintegrated into pathetic oppressive regimes that exert a totalitarian
stranglehold over the civil society. The coercion exercised by the native regime is
apparent in the novel where postcolonial hope has a short life and the country is
caught in a civil strife worse than the colonial oppression it has just been freed of. The
native regime in the novel makes use of what Gramsci would call “national popular”
and converts it into a way to not just hegemony but totalitarianism. Stanley Aronwitz,
in this respect observes, “Instead, postcolonialism is marked by inter-ethnic conflicts,
corruption, civil wars and the brazen return of economic, military and even political
domination by Western powers. The main problem remains the struggle for
hegemony” (ed. Aronwitz 17). Thus, one comes to understand that decolonization is a
complex process that continues long after freedom from the colonizer.

The colonizer sees the native’s land as an economic utility and has a
motivation to convert the land into a land that is conducive to their needs, as is clear
from the conversation between Pearce and Burton:

“This continent has the potential to be another America,” Burton said,
speaking with stubborn emphasis, as if he expected to be received
skeptically. “But not as long as the Africans are here. Look at this
region. The niggers here have been corrupted by the Arabs, by their
religion and their… their perfumed courtesies.” (Gurnah, Desertion
83).

The conversation between Pearce who is a historian and Burton who is a
diplomat can be seen as an interaction between civil society and the state, or
hegemony and dictatorship. They work together and as a united front in controlling
the subaltern. Another concern that comes to light from this discussion between
Pearce and Burton is that the conversion of the living breathing land into a resource imposes on it certain paralyzing limits. The land or space of Africa is cogently related to the lives of those who dwell on it. Africa is a paradise for the colonizers and becomes a consequent Inferno for the natives in Okungu’s words:

> The interior of East Africa looms large in the text as an imagined geographic space that is inexplicable and empty; hostile and yet inviting; barbaric yet holding the promise of paradise. Indeed the interior of East Africa alternates in the mind of the Arab traders between being an old world to which one returned, as Eden or Paradise, or being a whole new world to which one came to set up a new version of the old. (47)

The lives of the natives derive meaning from it and their customs are derived from the very geography of the place. These customs are repressed in the hegemonic and coercive acts of colonization. Native customs like the Western customs, however, can also be oppressive for certain people.

The repressions of custom are most strongly felt by Rehana, when she compares her restricted life starkly to the free abandon of women at wedding celebrations where they could dance to their heart’s fill in a separate room and indulge themselves in provocative gestures which were otherwise tabooed by their society. Women tended to the demands of their gender: “It was not really the words and melody that mattered at those times, but the noise and the laughter and the dancing… when the dancing began it was deliberately provocative, exaggerated swinging of hips and thrusting out of breasts, making fun of the lust that custom required women to suppress” (Gurnah, Desertion 55). Thus, we understand that there are ways that women find to counter social structures. The gaps in social structures are made use of by them in their treads towards agency.

Like Rehana, Farida too feels restricted because of her sexuality, and the womanhood that has been imposed on her by a society that dictates her life for her. There is no school that Farida can go to, even if she wishes to be educated:

> Although Farida had never seemed especially urgent about competing for the scarce chance of being one of the chosen, when she was excluded, she was full of grievance and anger… There was no future for her now, nothing at all. There was a co-educational convent school run by nuns and attached to the cathedral, but that was for Christians.
No sane parents would send them there, especially not girls, to be corrupted and degraded and bent into unbelievers. (Gurnah, *Desertion* 136)

However, she becomes an agent in more than one way, firstly, when she takes to stitching to become economically independent, secondly, when she chooses her own life partner and thirdly when she takes up writing poetry to liberate not only herself but society too from the stranglehold of the national regime.

Acceptance by society is a major concern for several characters in *Desertion* and *Paradise*. Aziz’s wife fears rejection because she is ordinarily considered ugly. Rashid faces rejection when he migrates to England. Migration involves the feeling of being deterritorialized, and hence also subalternity since subalternity brings in its wake, an exclusion from a certain social order or being marginalized within it.

Rashid’s migration and his stark entry into cosmopolitanism in *Desertion*, leaves him a subaltern in more ways than he was in his home town. The cosmopolitan culture haunts him and follows him wherever he goes and he feels his subalternity as he struggles to keep parts of himself alive in the United Kingdom. His is a condition of no return as much as it is a condition of no-entry.

In the months that followed, I began to think of myself as expelled, an exile. I make it seem a gradual process, and indeed it took months for me to find the words for the condition I was in, but I felt the sense of it a lot earlier. My father’s letter about not returning stunned me, paralyzed me with quiet panic. Where was I to go if not return?

(Rurnah, *Desertion* 221)

Rashid, when he goes to England, to study, comes face to face with his subalternity through a brush with the Western mindset. The subalternity of the native might be physical and psychological, but it is maintained through ideological formations, through all the components of the superstructure or as Althusser would say, though the ideological state apparatuses. The subalternity of the oppressed is inscribed in the life processes themselves. Rashid observes that he had known England only on the surface and being in England, he became acquainted for the first time with the colonization that England represented:

I realized that I did not know very much about England, that all the books I had studied and the maps I had pored over had taught me nothing of how England thought of the world and of people like me…
So I had to learn about that and about imperialism and how deeply the narratives of our inferiority and the aptness of European lordship had bedded down in what passed for the knowledge of the world. (Gurnah, Desertion 214)

Rashid faces colonization in diaspora but his condition remains one of no return. In Paradise, Yusuf’s state too is that of no return. When he leaves his home, he becomes an outsider to both Aziz’z city and his own city where bound and enslaved, he cannot return. Anne Ajulu Okungu observes, “He is readily inserted into an othering discourse which seeks to fix his identity based on imagined geography and knowledge of the world beyond the coastal town” (49). It becomes impossible for him to return to his family. He has lost, literally and metaphorically the very address that would lead him to his past. At the same time he cannot dare to look into the future, when he does, and runs away from his oppressor to join the German army, he is still a subaltern. The novel traces his evolution from a subaltern as a child and then as a worker, to a thinking young adult who understands his oppression and grapples with several philosophical questions of “freedom,” and “paradise”, etc. Gurnah problematizes the very idea of resistance and agency. He shows that resistance is not a simplistic act of finding a voice, or forming political associations or even of returning to a previous cultural identity. Rather resistance is what one must continuously seek and be on the lookout for.

In another sense, resistance is also being pitted against evil acts which try to undermine an individual’s subjectivity. There are several instances in the novels where evil ruptures through the surface of resistance and re-establishes itself. The resistance to evil is a continuous process, a never ending tussle for autonomy. The traditional idea of evil links acts that are undesirable, bad and must be prevented. The idea of evil is relative to the idea of God in that the omnipotent, omniscient and morally upright God is inherently opposed to the idea of evil. Thus, the existence of evil sparks an argument against the existence of God. Gurnah’s Paradise, as the title itself suggests, investigates the ideas of God and evil through the experiences that Yusuf undergoes. These include his desertion by his father and the evil he experiences subsequently, his religious fervor as a teenager to make sense of the world, and his various journeys. These bring him face to face with the evil that resides in human suffering, vulnerability and the evil that springs from a certain freedom and power to do evil.
The hegemony that ruptures the normal rhythms of Yusuf’s life is most visibly presented through the character of Aziz. Aziz is shown as a respectable man, one who is venerated in society and seen as an ideal despite his hegemonic acts. Aziz can keep Khalid and Yusuf as bonded labourers, cheat poor Africans in business and marry a much younger girl who is presented to him in remuneration of a debt, and yet no one would point him out as an evil man. On the other hand, Yusuf falls in love with Aziz’s young wife, who also wants to be liberated from Aziz’s stranglehold, and is ostracized by society for his act of love.

In *Paradise*, the evil that, the protagonist, Yusuf must face is also represented by Uncle Aziz’s wife who tries to corrupt him and comes about as a hegemon. She continually demands surrender on his part and an accession to her sexual whims. Similarly, in *Desertion*, the several desertions in the novel become instances of evil. The very first desertion by Pearce of Rehana is an evil act because it is a negation of her subjectivity. The lack of ethnic correspondence between Pearce and Rehana is the initiator of her desertion which is an evil act that affects Rehana and the generations of women who follow her. Pearce’s act is destructive and evil because it destroys Rehana and mutilates her conceptions of herself. The novel is perceptibly silent on the subject of Rehana’s feelings about her desertion by Pearce because of the apparentness of the act as being evil. The evil in Pearce’s act is reflected throughout the novel as an initiator of more evil. Badiou conceptualizes evil in terms that would relegate Pearce’s act as being a bottomless evil:

To summarize: There is no natural definition of evil; evil is always that which, in a particular situation, tends to weaken or destroy a subject. And the conception of evil is thus entirely dependent on the events from which a subject constitutes itself. It is the subject who prescribes what evil is, not a natural idea of evil that defines what a “moral” subject is. There is no general form of evil, because evil does not exist except as a judgment made, by a subject, on a situation, and on the consequences of his own actions in this situation. So the same act (to kill, for example) may be evil in a certain subjective context, and a necessity of the good in another. (Badiou 3)
In this context, several acts that would cursorily pass on as being evil actually arise from motivations to evade evil. Evil is relatively understood with regard to morality. Morality itself is strongly tied to the idea of pain and trauma. Whatever is hurtful is considered immoral. Alenka Zupancic defines evil as:

…that which lends its "face" to some disturbing void "beyond representation." … The point is not that real evil cannot be illustrated or represented, but that we have tendency to call "evil" precisely that which is not represented in a given representation. (Zupancic, “On Evil: An Interview” 2)

Some form of desertion of truth and a consequent adoption of falsity lies at the core of the definition of evil. In this context, Amin’s desertion of Jamila is an evil act. His renunciation of true love is evil because it begins from his weakness to uphold what he considers to be good. It is an evil that begins a cycle of self destruction. Zupancic states in this regard, that, “modes of ‘evil’ have little to do with what we usually call ‘evil.’ In these instances, ‘evil’ simply names the fact that the ‘good’ did not take place” (2). Thus the absence of good is where evil is present.

Desertion gives us not a single narrative to ponder over, but a series of narratives. It makes use of storytelling by various characters and throws in various viewpoints to understand the ideas of imperialism, ideology, oppression, hegemony and the like from varied angles. The novel begins with one such attempt, to tell the story where the plot of the novel actually begins. Then too, the author affirms that this single story has several versions. Pearce tells his own stories about his travels around the world, Amin writes his own memoir and sends it to Rashid, who writes critical papers about his diasporic experience. All these various stories have a tempo of survival. They haunt the narrative and despite their diversity, they are interrelated.

1.5 Conclusion

While Morrison and Tan are interested in presenting how subaltern subjectivities are scarred by colonization and living in diaspora, Gurnah is more actively concerned with the idea of freedom and how it is essential for nurturing one’s humanity. When one does not reconcile oneself with the identity of victim and has a stubborn determination to evade death, one becomes a human. The human subject is involved in a constant battle between subalternity and agency.
In *Beloved*, Baby Suggs and several other characters run counter to the temptation of wanting-to-be-animal. Baby Suggs battles with her slave past and tries to make a beautiful present. However, when Sethe murders Beloved, she gives up trying and succumbs finally to her subalternity. Paul D tries to live a normal life after running away from his slave master but the past continuously haunts him. He cannot stay too long in one place because of his fears of entrapment. Similarly, in *Paradise*, by Gurnah, Yusuf runs a constant risk of losing his humanity to the control that Aziz exerts on him. He fights continuously to uphold his dignity and succeeds to a large extent when he educates himself, learns about religion and even indulges in romantic affairs. However, his subalternity continuously follows him and he must keep renewing his identity if he is to survive and maintain his humanity. Amy Tan’s women characters are resisting subjects: the mothers in China, who must cross traditional barriers to enter a world where hegemony cannot pin them down to their restricted lives and the daughters in America who are second generation immigrants and exist in a confused state try in their own way to deal with their subalternity. The experience of subalternity springs from their divided identities and the impositions of contrasting cultures.

Thus, it was understood that the workings of hegemony fragment the individual’s psyche. When individuals live in hegemonic setups, their control over their lives decreases and this had a direct impact on their subjectivities and the self respect. Hegemony operates, however, within certain structures and tends to alter itself in accordance with the change in structures. It is continually changing. The various characters adapt themselves to operations of hegemony and become agents in their own right, in the process developing healthy subjectivities.