Chapter 2

Troubled Subjectivities in Morrison, Tan and Gurnah
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2.1 The Emergence of Subjectivity

The oppression of various characters in the selected novels and the threats to their subjectivities take various forms. The experience of colonization is an important aspect dealt with in these texts. Societies and individuals struggle for decolonization, either through violent throwing off of the burden of subalternity or through more subtle ways -- like assimilation -- that would re-position them vis-a-vis the colonizer. The novels taken up for study are not studied in the framework of white/native colonization but the larger field of colonizer/subaltern binary. Several characters in the novels try to develop positive modes of subjectivity in racialized and gendered scenarios. The postcolonial novel, among its several motivations, seeks to reposition the colonized vis-à-vis the hegemonic practices of the colonizer. The narration of the subaltern experience aerates the hidden sparks of the subaltern fire, simply by giving it narrative space that is denied in the oppressor’s narratives. Literature of and on subaltern populations of the world propels their voice out of its space of oblivion.

Subjectivity is an important concern in all the texts taken up for critical reading in this research project. Hence an understanding of the terms subjectivity and subject formation is of utmost importance. Peter Brooker defines subjectivity as, “the individual’s construction in social and ideological relations. Subjectivity is best understood as naming the interior experience of being a particular subject rather than becoming a subject’ (242). Subjectivity is therefore not something that is to be acquired from without but is an internal resource that must be tapped. Here it is important to describe the connotations that the word subject carries. The subject of theory, firstly, is the subject of grammar, the doer of an action, secondly, s/he is the political subject, one subjected to power, thirdly, the philosophical subject and fourthly, the subject as a human person. The subject carries a double meaning as being the agent as well as being subjected to oppression. It becomes evident from this
classification that the subject defines herself in multifarious ways, deriving meaning from different sectors of life.

Oppression’s tenacious hold on the subject prolongs the emergence of subjectivity. Transforming subjectivity is an important aspect in becoming an agent. Nevertheless, it is not a phenomenon that can grant permanent freedom. It has to be continually reformed and recast in the light of ongoing experience. It is rooted in one’s self that must be continually nourished. In this view, subjectivity is elemental in all struggles for agency.

Subjectivity remains inconsistent, changing and in evolution. An ultimate theory that describes subjectivity in all its aspects is therefore impossible to draw. Several theories developed around the idea of the subject try, however, to throw the subject into some relief. The discussion on subjectivity that follows is not aimed at reaching any final precept of human subjectivity but is a dialogue that seeks to converge several viewpoints and understand subjectivity by referring to selected theories.

There are several parameters on the basis of which subjectivity is challenged. Those in power can control their subjects on the basis of their bodies—gender, skin colour, sexuality, age, physical ability and the like. The body therefore becomes the carrier of oppression and mental and physical trauma. The outsiders to power like women and people of colour become embodied subjects. Their bodies are defined through ideological structures in such a way that they can be undermined and controlled. The very body of the subaltern becomes an alibi for colonization, and a valid justification for her oppression.

Poststructuralist, postcolonial and feminist theories show how the world is divided into binaries of powerful/powerless, oppressor/oppressed, white/black, male/female, occident/orient etc. These binaries point to a clear hierarchical relations. The western culture underscores its hegemony by rationalizing its avowed superiority in the face of the imposed inferiority of the Orient. The orient’s inferiority is not a fact, but exists as a justification for the hegemonic rule of the west.

Commonsense discourses, like humanism, view the individual as an autonomous and thinking being with a certain internalized conscious control on his or
her activities. This is most starkly expressed in the Cartesian declaration of “I think therefore I am.” The individual was viewed by these discourses as rational and complete. Certain nineteenth and twentieth century philosophers like Marx, Freud and Sartre, among others, questioned these theories of the subject, instead viewing the subject from standpoints which questioned her inherent autonomy and completeness.

Two theories that influenced human thought past strict barriers, rejuvenated the understanding of life and providing fodder for future theories were the theory of capital given by Marx and the theory of the unconscious given by Freud.

Marx in his *The German Ideology* (1932) remarked that, “Consciousness does not determine life, life determines consciousness” (47). Marx expounded the concept of ideology to describe how the subject is conditioned by ideology. Ideology is a part of the very structure of society. Society, according to Marx, has an economic base on which stands the superstructure that includes the cultural aspects of society, its laws, religion, education, media, arts and literature. The functioning of these is affected by the economic base. He writes in *The Preface to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859): “In the social production of their lives men enter into relations that are specific, necessary and independent of their will … The totality of these relations of production forms the economic structure of society, the real basis from which rises a legal and political superstructure” (159). Ideology operates in the superstructure and becomes the glass through which subjects view their world. It runs through the realm of the superstructure and makes us think in certain set ways of which we are not conscious, while also naturalizing our thinking to us.

The subject in ideology becomes a subject in a double sense, both as an agent of ideology and as being subjected to it. The identification of subjects with the other(s) immerses them into ideological practices that keep reinforcing the unnatural world as being natural. Their responses to the world become part of their subjectivities. These responses in ideology are reiterated and internalized and the subject loses authentic subjectivity.

A study of the subject is incomplete without drawing on Freud’s ideas on the unconscious, since the oppressed subject’s existence is psychologically debilitating and traumatic. Freud traced mental illness and individual personality to events in childhood. There is no escape from these because even if we exterminate them from
the conscious mind, they rebound with a greater force from the unconscious. The past for Freud, therefore, is always at hand. Freud proposed the theory of the unconscious, conscious and subconscious to define how the past exerts influence on the present:

There are other mental processes or mental material which have no such easy access to consciousness, but which must be inferred, discovered, and translated into conscious form in the manner that has been described. It is for such material that we reserve the name of the unconscious proper. Thus we have attributed three qualities to mental processes: they are either conscious, preconscious, or unconscious. The division between the three classes of material which have these qualities is neither absolute nor permanent. What is preconscious becomes conscious, as we have seen, without any activity on our part; what is unconscious can, as a result of our efforts, be made conscious, though in the process we may have an impression that we are overcoming what are often very strong resistances. (Freud, “Introduction to Psychoanalysis” 34-35)

The loss of concrete subjectivity sometimes happens in concurrence with traumatic events and the traumatic event by virtue of its being painful and anxiety-arousing is repressed to the depths of the unconscious. It is an event that cannot be assimilated into the conscious history of the subject. The mind refuses to accept it as a part of its conscious life. There is also a collective unconscious which is shared by humanity. The concept of the collective unconscious was first given by Carl Jung who in his book The Structure of the Psyche (1916) defines it as:

The collective unconscious - so far as we can say anything about it at all - appears to consist of mythological motifs or primordial images, for which reason the myths of all nations are its real exponents. In fact, the whole of mythology could be taken as a sort of projection of the collective unconscious... We can therefore study the collective unconscious in two ways, either in mythology or in the analysis of the individual. (42)

It is important to study the collective unconscious because the cultural memory has a bearing on the making of subjectivity. By understanding the collective
unconscious one can understand better how the mental aspects of subjectivity are linked to social and cultural life.

In his *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) Fanon says that the collective unconscious is not inscribed in genes but is cultural: “But the collective unconscious . . . is purely the sum of prejudices, myths, collective attitudes of a given group. . . . the collective unconscious is cultural, which means acquired” (Fanon, “Black Skin” 188). He goes on to define the Western unconscious as:

> In the remotest depth of the European unconscious an inordinately black hollow has been made in which the most immoral impulses, the most shameful desires lie dormant. And as every man climbs up toward whiteness and light, the European has tried to repudiate this uncivilized self, which has attempted to defend itself. When European civilization came into contact with the black world, with those savage peoples, everyone agreed: Those Negroes were the principle of evil. (Fanon, “Black Skin” 190)

The creation of the subaltern is a complex process that involves ideological and repressive subordination. Fanon translates the concept of ideology for postcolonial subalternizing of the subject and extends it to account for the justification and naturalizing of oppression. The native loses concrete subjectivity by being split into a threefold schema of body, race and history. Fanon describes his situation as a native, “What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a haemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood” (Fanon, “Black Skin” 112). In this sense the native and women’s predicament is related, since biology becomes its defining point. Racist and oppressive practices deny the subaltern a past that is of any value. The subaltern, therefore, must reestablish an alternate history to assert its value and in turn her own existence.

Though Fanon derives certain ideas from Marx, he distinguishes between the struggles for racial and class emancipation. Class struggles have at their centre emancipation by economically equalizing society, by eradicating class. Race is a category that cannot be eradicated, and must be emancipated. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon contends that to be emancipated, the black man must cast off his mask, break the white mirrors and look at himself as a free human being. He further
observes that colonization is accompanied by a simultaneous assessment of the native. In his *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon defines colonization as being a violent phenomenon. This violence can only be opposed with counter violence through bombs, bullets and bayonets since: “At the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores his self respect.” (Fanon, “The Wretched” 94). He also maintains that the colonized individual finds freedom only through violence. The decolonization process begins when the native realizes that the colonizer’s precepts about her are baseless. This is the moment of her initiation into a humanizing process. The colonial space must be dismantled.

Subjectivity, as it is understood in existential philosophy acquires several understandings of the subject’s subalternity. Existentialism focuses on individual’s supremacy. It sees the subject as the doer. Existentialism makes overt forces less and less important and makes the subject the centre of existence. Sartre says: “...we shall not say that a prisoner is always free to go out of prison, which would be absurd, nor that he is always free to long for release, which would be an irrelevant truism, but that he is always free to try to escape (or get himself liberated); that is, that whatever condition may be, he can project his escape and learn the value of his project by undertaking some action” (Sartre, “Nothingness” 483-4). For Sartre freedom is synonymous with choice, “being identical with acting, supposes a commencement of realization in order that the choice may be distinguished from the dream and the wish” (Sartre, “Nothingness” 483). He also questions the idea of essence and thereby questions the essentializing colonizers that tend to subalternize and dehumanize the subject. Postcolonial, Marxist and feminist theories see certain forces controlling the world through ideology. These forces create subaltern subjects. But Sartre sees these forces to be limited in a world where there is an almost unlimited scope for acting affirmatively. Sartre observes:

“(1) No factual state whatever it may be (the political and economic structure of society, the psychological “state”, etc.) is capable by itself of motivating [motiver] any act whatsoever. For an act is a projection of the for-itself toward what is not, and what is can in no way determine by itself what is not. (2) No factual state can determine consciousness to apprehend it as a négatité or as a lack. Better yet no
factual state can determine consciousness to define it and to circumscribe it.” (Sartre, “Nothingness” 435-6)

Subjectivity in itself is a vast phenomenon. It is impossible to fully define one’s subjectivity because, as Sartre says, every being is infinite because every state of being is defined by another state of being which is explained by another state of being ad infinitum. Therefore, there is only an infinite deferral of meaning. Subjects with problematized subjectivities therefore must end this chain and act in immediacy to counter their oppression. Sartre questions the very idea of determinism. He contends that if every act is determined then there can be no real independence, only effects and reflexes. He asserts:

We are a choice, and for us, to be is to choose ourselves. Even this disability from which I suffer I have assumed by the very fact that I live; I surpass it toward my own projects, I make of it the necessary obstacle for my being, and I cannot be crippled without choosing myself as crippled. This means that I choose the way I constitute my disability (as “unbearable,” “humiliating,” “to be hidden,” “to be revealed to all,” “an object of pride,” “the justification of my failures,” etc.).” (Sartre, “Nothingness” 393)

Sartre, however, in his book Being and Nothingness contends that we are separated from the facticity of the past by “nothingness”. We agree to be influenced by our past and it influences us. Our past is symbolic and metaphorical and how it is perceived depends on what symbol we attach to it. It is viable at this juncture to describe the loaded terms of facticity and nothingness. Facticity has been variously understood and theorized in philosophy. It was theorized at some length by Heidegger who related it to our “thrownness” in the world or Dasein” (237). Facticity, in Sartre’s sense of the word, refers to the facts of one’s life that determine the course that one’s life takes, either towards freedom or away from it. He comments:

The for-itself is sustained by a perpetual contingency for which it assumes the responsibility and which it assimilates without ever being able to suppress it. This perpetually evanescent contingency of the in-itself […] is what we shall call the facticity of the for-itself. It is this facticity which permits us to say that the for itself is, that it exists,
although we can never realize the facticity, and although we always apprehend it through the for-itself.” (Sartre, “Nothingness” 131)

Sartre evaluates facticity against his theory of being. He contends that there are three forms of being possible in human existence: being in-itself, being for-itself, and being for-others. The being in-itself is an inanimate existence, where one cannot act and must accept immovably what comes one’s way or be moved only by external forces. An authentic existence, however can come about only in being for-itself. The life of this form of being is not determined from outside, but s/he makes conscious choices and acts to control and change her life as s/he wills. The being for-others emerges when the onlooker gazes at the individual. In this position of being looked at, the individual is conferred an identity from without. To free oneself from this conceptualization of the self, one must revert back with a glance at the observer.

Thomas Flynn, a critic of Sartre observes:

Being-in-itself and being-for-itself have mutually exclusive characteristics and yet we (human reality) are entities that combine both, which is the ontological root of our ambiguity. The in-itself is solid, self-identical, passive and inert. It simply “is.” The for-itself is fluid, non self-identical, and dynamic. It is the internal negation or “nihilation” of the in-itself, on which it depends. Viewed more concretely, this duality is cast as “facticity” and “transcendence.” The “givens” of our situation such as our language, our environment, our previous choices and our very selves in their function as in-itself constitute our facticity. As conscious individuals, we transcend (surpass) this facticity in what constitutes our “situation.” (Flynn 2)

Facticity comes in Sartre’s ontology as something that must be resisted and countered. If one feels that the facts of one’s past life determine her present and future, she will be chained to the facticity of her past and will never be free. On the other hand, when someone believes that they, themselves are, the movers of their lives and can shape the future, the past automatically gets countered.

Sartre contends that since the being has no essence and can be anything, s/he must actually be nothing. Nothingness is where her endless possibility to be arises from. When a being is defined as something, she has stopped growing and has been
contoured clearly and factually. When the being ceases to be a fact and to be concomitant with anything but her own being, she is everything and nothing. In being free and being a nothingness, s/he does not have a nature, since only animals and inanimate objects can have a nature. Sartre rejected the very idea of human nature as being normative. The non-human can be judged against norms as positivity or negativity, but humans are nothingness and hence do not have a nature. For humans, existence precedes essence, while for objects, it is vice-versa. Sartre goes against the theistic idea that humans are created by God, because he rejects the very idea of the existence of God as the ultimate truth. For him the ultimate truth is freedom. If we were not created by God, we can create ourselves and hence can be free. Sartre dethrones God as the centre of all things, in turn making the being as the centre.

Althusser works on Marx’s theory of ideology and develops the concept of ideological state apparatuses in his book *Lenin and Philosophy* (1968). According to Althusser the working proletariat is taught not only technical skills, but also subjection to ruling ideology. This subjection is achieved through Ideological State Apparatuses, which Althusser distinguishes from Repressive State Apparatuses. The Repressive State Apparatuses include the carriers of the state’s force such as the government, army, police and the courts. Ideological state apparatuses are different in that they operate not through force but hegemonically. The ISAs include family, school, religion, the legal system, trade unions, communication and culture, including the arts and literature etc. Ideology according to Althusser, “represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to the real conditions of existence. While the RSAs function through repression, the ISAs function through ideology. Althusser says: “The category of the subject is constitutive of all ideology, but at the same time and immediately I add that the category of the subject is only constitutive of all ideology insofar as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of ‘constituting’ concrete individuals as subjects” (116).

Individuals view themselves to be irreplaceable, authentic and natural. Ideology, however, interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects. To define interpellation, Althusser gives the example of a person on the street, hailed as, “Hey you!” Almost always, the right person responds to the hailing and turns her face. Ideology, thus, transforms individuals into subjects. For Althusser, interpellation and ideology are the same things. Interpellation is the physical act that expresses the
working of ideology. The hailing or interpellation of an individual is actually an overt call to the individual that always already inheres in her psyche. The subject turns because even without being called, she knows that she will be called and it is as if she waits for it. Thus the subject is already interpellated even before the physical act of the call takes place. The subject is born in an ideological world where she takes on certain identities and functions in accordance with them so as to be accepted as part of certain social groups or formations. Althusser defines the subject as: “(1) a free subjectivity, a centre of initiatives, author of and responsible for its actions; (2) a subjected being who submits to a higher authority, and is therefore stripped of all freedom except for freely accepting his submission… There are no subjects except by and for their subjection” (123).

Althusser understands that for the factory to keep on functioning and the proletariat to keep on intermittently performing their duties, the conditions of production must be kept constant. For this, the bourgeois must, paradoxically, keep changing the internal setup and the mindset of the proletariat in tune with the external changes happening in the system and society. For the proletariat to keep on existing, the relations with the proletariat must keep on changing. With this view, we can safely deduce that ideology keeps covering the system of binaric hierarchies and the gap between the oppressor and the subaltern.

According to Fanon, colonization is motivated not by the idea of slavery but by the idea of freedom. The colonizer always knows that the slave can be free if she chooses to be by acting in good faith. This fear of freedom propels the colonizer to commit hegemonic and oppressive acts. The colonizer knows that the slave has the inherent freedom to refuse to be colonized and hence counters it with terror. The colonizing gaze dehumanizes the subject. The subaltern can pin down the colonizer by looking at his face. The objectification can turn back onto the colonizer with the literal and metaphoric act of looking up. It does not readily happen, however, because the subaltern is entrenched in colonial discourse and believes in her inferiority. The subject has accepted her subordination as natural and treats the colonizer as being undoubtedly superior. This inferiority complex delays decolonization.

Two theories of subjectivity that hold purport at present are feminism and postcolonialism, while several others like ecocriticism and queer theory are gaining
importance. The fact however, remains, that these theories cannot be strictly compartmentalized and in fact draw on each other for their understanding of subjectivity.

The native becomes a subaltern subject and because she is a subaltern and realizes that she is a subaltern devoid of a concrete subjectivity, she cannot speak or act in good faith because of existing under various discursive formations. One is so completely a subaltern because discursive formations work in oppressing people. Discourse, according to Foucault, conditions our thought and makes us believe in certain precepts about ourselves and the world around us. Said takes up the idea of discourse in understanding how colonization operates. In his book *Orientalism*, he writes about Orientalist discourse’s:

…close ties to the enabling socio-economic and political institutions, and its redoubtable durability. After all, any system of ideas that can remain unchanged as teachable wisdom (in academies, books, congresses, universities, foreign-service institutes) from the period of Ernest Renan in the late 1840s until the present in United States must be more formidable than a system of lies. Orientalism therefore, is not an airy European fantasy about the Orient but a created body of theory and practice in which, for many generations, there has been a considerable material investment. (14)

Said further asserts that the colonial discourse sustains colonial rule not by force but through hegemony. The colonized subject views herself/himself in relation to and difference from the western subject. The subaltern acquires the feeling of incompleteness when this schema is fed into her thinking. The subaltern becomes invisible by virtue of the blinding visibility of the oppressor in everyday life. The subject acquires the sense of unbelonging and voicelessness, while being trapped in a traumatic space.

Freedom is itself experienced as a form of dread because freedom is both infinite possibility as well as infinite responsibility. We experience anguish when we think about future because it reveals to us that we will be changed selves in creating our future. There is a certain consistency that the colonized wants to maintain even when she is colonized. The tearing of the veneer of stability creates anguish and the
subaltern cannot act in good faith. The native must understand that she is not a subaltern in essence. As Sartre theorizes, one is endless possibility and hence one is nothingness because one can be anything.


Toni Morrison writes about the traumatic pasts of the African Americans which problematizes the emergence of their subjectivity. This problematization happens through the dullness of the narrative voice. The narrator’s voice is bland, almost plain and disinterested. She narrates events that ordinarily generate melodramatic images and deep feelings of disgust, as if she has been acclimatized to these. Both *Beloved* and *A Mercy* are informed by this bland voice. While being dull, this voice is compulsive and the stories that are told compel their own birth. The reader becomes obsessed with them. Just as they have the inner force to emerge, they have the momentum to stay.

*Beloved* (1987) and *A Mercy* (2008) are novels that reveal the debased condition of African Americans and more generally how existing in totalitarian social setups affects the subject. Since oppression of some kind exists and keeps on functioning smoothly despite several organizations engaged in overthrowing it, such texts as these become important in understanding subjectivity and the trajectory towards freedom. In both the texts the main characters are African American women who grapple with the throes of their existence and struggle to have complete selves. They try to become agents in several ways and deal with the exigencies of slave life to emerge as authentic human beings. Their telling becomes an important way to vent their trauma, but the road to subjectivity remains bumpy and misleading. Agency when it does arrive is partial, fissured and conditional. Sethe, Baby Suggs, Beloved, Paul D and Denver in *Beloved* and Florens, Lina, Sorrow, Rebekka and Jacob in *A Mercy* deal with their trauma and move idiosyncratically towards some kind of healthy subjectivities.

In Morrison’s novels, the reminiscences and stories that the characters tell, in Freudian terminology, have an underlying latent content and an apparent manifest content. They operate at two levels. It is important to define these terms as Freud
explained them in his book *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* (1920): “The time has come to introduce two new terms, which we could have used long ago. We shall call that which the dream relates, the manifest content of the dream; that which is hidden, which we can only reach by the analysis of ideas we shall call latent dream thoughts” (Freud, “Psychoanalysis” 102). The latent content in the stories of various characters often carries multiple meanings that must be analyzed, unified and historically placed. The latent parts of their subjective positions have an internal momentum to stay hidden. Thus the subject is alienated from a vital part of his/her self that remains unconscious.

Morrison’s characters are alienated from their own selves and hence are also alienated from the external world. They carry a burden that weighs down their subjectivity. They are so preoccupied with the fact of colonization and undermined by the psychical workings of trauma that they cannot operate in society as normal, fulfilled subjects. This alienation is deep seated and runs in family life too. Baby Suggs in *Beloved* is alienated from her children. Sethe is alienated from the neighbourhood where she lives and has had no affiliation or interaction with society for years. Her agency lies in becoming fully human again and it begins to happen around the end of the book when her bonds with the women in the society are strengthened during the process of Beloved’s expulsion: “Standing alone on the porch Beloved is smiling. But now her hand is empty. Sethe is running away from her, running, and she feels the emptiness in her hand Sethe has been holding. Now she is running into the faces of the people out there, joining them and leaving Beloved behind” (Morrison, *Beloved* 309). The ghost of memory has been symbolically exorcized. The author might be hinting at the fact that becoming human again after the trauma of colonization is indeed an uphill task. We can, however, try to be complete subjects by facing our past in a more positive and rational way, rather than being weighed down by it, like Sethe is after Beloved comes to stay with them: “Denver saw the flesh between her mother’s forefigner and thumb fade. Saw Sethe’s eyes bright but dead, alert but vacant, paying attention to everything about Beloved—her listless palms, her forehead” (Morrison, *Beloved* 285).

A symptomatic reading of *Beloved* and *A Mercy* shows what is hidden in the gaps of the narrative. In *Beloved*, the ghost that haunts Sethe’s house can be seen as her own guilt producing memories that haunt her. From this angle, the ghost is
actually in Sethe’s psyche. It is her inner life and subjectivity that carry the presence of the ghost and not necessarily the house.

Several characters in *A Mercy* find themselves to be misplaced and outside their comfort zones. The novel is about a time in American history when the Europeans, the Africans and the natives found themselves together in facing the hostility of the American south. Jacob finds the south difficult to traverse, his help Lina and wife Rebekka find the farm untamable, Sorrow finds herself alone and anomalous, and Florens undertakes a revelatory journey through the unknown land, in the process understanding her subjectivity. We come to understand that nature is a part of the world’s hostility. It stands at loggerheads with the human world and threatens it. Humans, nevertheless, try to tame it.

One understands that in *A Mercy*, the very mercy shown by the masters at the farm can be read symptomatically as being a natural outcome of their own needs and not necessarily an aversion to the idea of slavery of African Americans. Anissa Wardi introduces *A Mercy* as being set “at the dawn of the slave trade when race was not yet rhetorically constructed as an absolute category, *A Mercy* links nation building — the creation and inhabitation of the country — to the forced labor of Africans, the decimation of Native American nations and the transmutation of earth into farms” (ed. Stave and Tally 23). Subjectivity for the characters in *A Mercy*, becomes something that is not just personal, but forms through interpersonal linkages among various characters and between humans and nature. Also through these linkages, Morrison explicates the meaning of the American Dream as being based on a nightmare. It engenders the realization that the American Dream, that is considered a positive humanist progression towards economic freedom and democratic ideals, was actually realized on the grounds of slavery.

The characters often come to terms with their subalternity through multiple processes, one among these being bonds of solidarity. The search for subjectivity is not a solitary act. It has a social progression, an interpersonal progression. The voiceless is often, not voiceless as an individual, but is voiceless as being part of a particular stigmatized group. Finding oneself is, therefore, a process that is not completely personal, but involves society. For instance, Florens in *A Mercy* goes on a search for Blacksmith, which is also a search for her own self. She says about this
journey: “My head is light with confusion of two things, hunger for you and scare if I am lost. Nothing frights me more than this errand and nothing is more temptation. From the day you disappear I dream and plot. To learn where you are and how to be there” (Morrison, “Mercy” 2). The disappearance of Blacksmith, who is a black man, from Florens’s life is not just the disappearance of someone she loved, but also a disappearance of the ideal black figure. In finding him she would find herself. This belief might be seen as an indication of her innocence about life, but also as a metaphor for freedom, since Blacksmith is a free African American: “He had rights then, and privileges, like Sir. He could marry, own things, travel, sell his own labour” (Morrison, “Mercy” 43).

Florens’s quest to find Blacksmith is also symbolically a quest to find the subjective ideal. Reaching subjectivity is a tough journey. It is something that must be achieved slowly over time and the path, though it is self revelatory, is nevertheless a path one can get lost on. It is, according to Florens, a pathless night. Playing with metaphors here can be illuminating—the path that Florens takes is a path in darkness, a path in one’s essentialized black self: “More than fear of loving bears or birds bigger than cows, I fear pathless night. How, I wonder, can I find you in the dark?” (Morrison, “Mercy” 3). It is a path to find a non-essentialized image of herself. Subjectivity is a move to walk beyond the essentialized into the domain of one’s true humanity. Florens’s journey is symbolic of the African Americans’ journeys to reach subjectivities. For subjectivity to emerge, one must tread on unknown territory and reach the hidden or eclipsed parts of the self.

Someone who has been living with an essentialized image of herself that has been imposed on her cannot easily embark on a journey to tap her subjectivity. Florens has to find something that she has only vaguely seen. She has traumatic memories of the life she has lived and there are aspects of it that refuse to be assimilated into her self-image. At the same time, it is what she has known as an important and imposing part of her life that cannot be erased from the psyche.

In A Mercy, Morrison uses spatial symbols to voice the experience of how the characters reach their subjectivity. The farm at a basic level is a symbol for the untamable American landscape: “Sir was a hurricane of activity laboring to bring nature under his control… she found him, head thrown back, staring at the sky as if in
wondering despair at the land’s refusal to obey his will” (Morrison, “Mercy” 47). It is a landscape that resists human effort to tame it. It bends the white and black, man and woman, adult and child in submission and in their common struggles, they are somehow equalized. The novel is set in the America of the past when European colonizers were beginning to establish their roots in its hitherto unexplored space. It was a place where nothing was firmly established and hence possibilities were many as also the constraints. It is a symbol of human unity in the face of nature.

Controlled, humanized natural environment, as in a farm, is the setting in which trauma underplays its role in Toni Morrison’s selected texts. The farm becomes a multifarious symbol of evolution and degeneration. At a concrete level, the farm is a totalitarian space that disfigures the African American through the labour that it demands but also through the branding, lynching, beating and rape that happen on its grounds. It is etched with oppressive and misogynistic acts. It is a space that cannot be assimilated into the consciousness and, at the same time, cannot be eradicated from memory. It lingers on and stays in the minds of the oppressed in some form, either conscious or unconscious. Sethe says, “Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it’s not. Places, places are still there” (Morrison, Beloved 43).

The farm is a space that not only fragments the psyches of the slaves in Beloved but also haunts them. Like the farm that haunts their psyches, even the neighbourhood where free slaves cohabit, is haunted by past memories of slavery. In a way, the farm’s traumatic memories haunt them even in their homes where they exist as relatively free people. We are told by Baby Suggs and without exaggeration of facts that every house in the neighbourhood is haunted. She observes, “What’d be the point?” asked Baby Suggs. “Not a house in the country ain’t packed to the rafters with some dead Negro’s grief” (Morrison, Beloved 6). She says this in the light of the suffering that haunts the oppressed even after the end of slavery.

Emancipation is a tough end to reach and it can take centuries for the oppressed community to come to terms with their haunting past. The farm, Sweet Home, where Sethe used to reside is a symbol of this inheritance. The space never leaves the subalterns and is an inheritance that cannot be shed, only shared as an
experience with others. For Denver, who is used to hearing stories of Sweet Home, it becomes a live yet far flung reality. Her house, 124 at Bluestone road, is a reality for her. This house is haunted by her murdered sister Beloved.

Beloved’s ghost is also a symbol for Sethe’s haunting memories in Beloved. This ghost has no permanent form, but keeps on evolving, making one realize that meanings of trauma too keep on changing as the subject understands it with her growing consciousness. Thus, trauma is not simply an uneasy reality that cannot be assimilated within the consciousness; it negotiates the space between the conscious and the unconscious.

At one instance in A Mercy, the subject is said to be a resource that grows. Downes compares slaves to material resources: “They ship in more. Like firewood, what burns to ash is refueled. And don’t forget, there are births” (Morrison, “Mercy” 28). The slave, therefore, is a human who may be already dead or non-living for the colonizer. She is a non-living entity and lacks the vital features of humans like emotions, instincts, intelligence, and even the ability to sense. A slave is a slave and nothing more. It is as if she is visible to the colonizer in one form only, as a resource and ceases to exist for him in all other respects.

Jacob in the process of choosing slaves to buy, goes through a set of advertisements for the sale of slaves: “A likely Negro about 9 years… Girl or woman that is handy in the kitchen, sensible, speaks good English, complexion between yellow and black” (Morrison, “Mercy” 50). The racial and class division becomes apparent. Even when these advertisements list the desirable attributes of slaves, those are merely reflective of their economic value. Their desirability reifies them. They are appraised only as objects.

Lina is a first generation slave and carries the paraphernalia and beliefs of her native culture. She brings along not just her deer skin dress but also her attitudes and memories which she tries to fit into the new landscape and culture. The other women characters have idiosyncratic ways of coming to terms with their subjectivities. Lina develops a hybrid thought that fuses the European science and native beliefs and gives her strength. In the novel, she becomes the nodal point of coalition between the west and the east. This heterogeneity of her place strengthens her and she gains authority in
curing people. When she first comes to the farm, she becomes one with the landscape, adapting herself to it:

She decided to fortify herself by piecing together scraps of what her mother taught her before dying in agony. Relying on memory and her own resources, she cobbled together neglected rites, merged Europe medicine with native, scripture with lore… Found in other words a way to be in the world… She cawed with birds, chatted with plants, spoke to squirrels, sang to the cow and opened her mouth to rain.

(Morrison, “Mercy” 46)

Lina controls her life by referring to the legacies of her native culture. It also becomes a process through which her subjectivity emerges. Her controlling of nature becomes a metaphor for the control she wants to exercise over her own life. She tries throughout the narrative to channelize her life and let her subjectivity emerge. Lina’s personality is an example of nothingness as the term is used by Sartre. She is a character who recreates herself through conscious effort and refutation of her oppressive past. No doubt, she learns from it, but it does not automatically control her life.

For the Africans and native Americans, the white man is a sinister unnatural phenomenon. They are absurd not only because they are colonizers but also because their sense of life is different. Lina feels that though they are wise, they lack instinct. When Jacob cuts trees to construct a house she observes: “Killing trees in that number, without asking their permission, of course his efforts would stir up mal-fortune… He mystified Lina. All Europes did. Once they terrified her, then they rescued her. Now they simply puzzled her” (Morrison, “Mercy” 42). Lina as an oppressed person empowers herself by making a counter subjectivity that incorporates her strengths but at the same time is also aware of the colonizer’s weaknesses. Lina, however, feels that Jacob and Mistress are more natural because they are not thorough-going colonizers and are supportive masters. The inhabitants of the farm in A Mercy are somehow connected to each other not only in their struggles with the land but also in their common lack of belonging anywhere. They are all orphans and have a need for solidarity and affiliative links. Their subjectivities emerge from these connections of solidarity. There is a void in their very being that comes from being
alone in the world and their subjectivities can begin to emerge once this void has been fulfilled.

Sorrow, in *A Mercy*, is a character who is a stark carrier of this void. She is thoroughly scarred by colonization so that she is incapable of affiliating with other humans, even other slaves. Sorrow has a fractured self. She is a schizophrenic and trauma has left her incapable of integrating her life events into her self-image: “She did not mind when they called her Sorrow so long as Twin kept using her real name… having two names was convenient since Twin couldn’t be seen by anybody else” (Morrison, “Mercy” 114). Having two names and a twin self are symptoms of a divided personality. Sorrow represents an extreme of ugliness, unruliness and misshapenness. She is mentally diseased, and is controlled by her past.

The idea of disease and cure prevails throughout the novel. Jacob and Rebekka fall ill and must be cured if the slaves on the farm are to survive. Sorrow is cured both mentally and physically. The physical and mental illness in the novel can be linked to the diseased land of the Fisher King in *Wasteland*: “What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow / Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,/ You cannot say, or guess, for you know only/ A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,/ And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,/ And the dry stone no sound of water. Only/ There is shadow under this red rock” (Eliot 1). Jacob’s kingdom, in the poem, begins to decay because of his impotence which can be metaphorically related in the novel to the inability of Jacob and Rebekka to have a child. Moral corruption is the reason for the decaying world of *A Mercy*. The hostility of land generates a struggle for survival among its inhabitants.

The struggle for survival is reinforced through colonization and the denial of physical resources and psychological fulfilment that come with it. Florens, before the blacksmith mistreats her and challenges her identity as a black woman, is a vulnerable, defenceless creature who is eager to please and blames herself for the wrongs of others. She understands her enslavement to the blacksmith only when he overtly treats her like one after she accidentally injures his child. He says to Florens: “You are nothing but wilderness. No constraint. No mind” (Morrison, “Mercy” 139). Florens, using Althusser’s terminology, is hailed as such by Blacksmith. She does not exist independently but is tied to Blacksmith. Even her sense of self is ideologically
controlled by him. She exists for the sole reason, as it were, to be related to him. However, once her fairy tale dreams are shattered, she learns to have a larger vision. Ironically, for her subjectivity to emerge, she first has to be made a subject. Thereafter is the mode that propels her towards her fullness. She says: “I am become wilderness but I’m also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. No truth, my love. None. Hear me? Slave. Free. I last” (Morrison, “Mercy” 159).

Sometimes the dehumanization resulting from oppression is imbibed by the subaltern and she moves even farther from subjectivity as Sethe does initially when she murders her daughter. Her subjectivity becomes fractured and fissured by internalization of oppression. Mary Jane Suero Elliott asserts regarding Sethe’s inhering of oppression, “Sethe's act of infanticide manifests her internalization of the oppressive ideologies that justify her enslavement. As a result, her story is about learning how to resist effectively, how to develop an empowered rather than a destructive subjectivity” (2). Later in the novel, however, she becomes a strong woman who has relatively greater control over her life. Denver describes her as: “The one who never looked away, who when a man got stomped to death by a mare right in front of Sawyer’s restaurant did not look away; and when a sow began eating her own litter did not look away then either” (Morrison, Beloved 14).

Elliott compares Sethe to America that must incorporate the slave past as being a vital part of its history and confront it. Coming to terms with this past is also a move into forbidden territory that lies beyond the island of democracy. The strands of different cultures that collude in American space must come together to give new definitions of America and to influence it to reassess and quit its neocolonial policies. Subjection of a culture under another should be unacceptable since the subaltern suffers due to it.

Jenna Fuston-White observes, “Morrison not only ‘rememories’ the experience of slavery, but she also ties her work to the production of critical theory as she deconstructs the Enlightenment notion of subjectivity” (1). The Western creation of knowledge and discourse around the Orient, according to Said, tends to be ethnocentric. It understands African American experiences through this white
telescope. The black is seen to be outside of knowledge and is something or someone that cannot be understood.

Blackness, even when thought about symbolically, is an image of absence, sightlessness, mourning, death, fear of the unknown, damnation, chaos, confusion etc. These abstractions of meaning have found their way into the racialized definitions of the African American selfhood. These definitions arise out of the scepticism of what or who is different. This is, at the same time, associated with the political and economic need to control the African American. What, however, makes the traumatic maltreatment of the African necessary? Why is Sethe raped, and why are Africans in the novel burned, lynched and mauled? These questions begin in the horror that one feels when confronted with these stories.

*Beloved* and *A Mercy* blur the binary divisions of male/female, black/white and dead/alive. In *Beloved*, Sethe is the head of the family and before her it is Baby Suggs. Sethe is also the bread winner. In *A Mercy*, Jacob is always out on business and in his absence the three women Rebekka, Lina and Florens take over the household. In both these novels, one finds examples of women who can think and behave relatively independently of patriarchal discourses. In *A Mercy*, women are independent, however, only within the circle of their farm and till Jacob and Rebekka are alive. Lina says:

Don’t die, Miss. Don’t. Herself, Sorrow, a newborn and maybe Florens—three unmastered women and an infant out here, alone, belonging to no one, became wild game for anyone. None of them could inherit; none was attached to the church or recorded in its books. Female and illegal, they would be interlopers, squatters, if they stayed after Mistress died, subject to purchase, hire, assault, abduction, exile.”

(Morrison, “Mercy” 56)

After Jacob’s death they are unprotected and lose their independence. In Sweet Home too, the Africans are not treated like slaves, but as humans. Their humanity, however, is lost once the control of the farm moves into School Teacher’s hands: “In their relationship with Garner was true metal: they were believed and trusted, but most of all they were listened to… It was School Teacher who taught them otherwise. A truth that was like a scarecrow in rye: they were only Sweet Home men at Sweet
Home. One step on that ground and they were tresspassers among the human race” (Morrison, *Beloved* 148). School Teacher becomes an essentializing and defining principle for the slaves in Sweet Home. He defines Sethe’s body by actually measuring it. Sethe, Mary Jane Suero Elliott argues, becomes a fetish – a dehumanized sexual object – through his ideology: “Here we have white othering of a black woman and the resulting damage of a fetishized identity. The schoolteacher observes Sethe’s rape and makes it a discursive act… Sethe, then, experiences the fetishization of herself and her body by the schoolteacher and his nephews” (3).

In *Beloved*, the other is primarily the white man. In *A Mercy* however, the idea of the other is complicated. The other is not just restricted to the image of the white man. In this novel, the blacksmith who is a black man becomes the male or patriarchal other for Florens. Otherness is not just restricted to human figures, but also refers to anything that is hostile to one’s survival. In *A Mercy*, nature is a prominent other. The novel is replete with references to death in the face of nature-induced illness or disasters and the characters are engaged in a constant struggle with mortality.

In *Beloved* too, mortality is a major concern, given the deaths that occur in the novel and the haunting that follows. The haunting and mortality in *Beloved* is the point of defeat or running away for several characters like Paul D and Baby Suggs. Right in the beginning of the novel, one reads the incident where Sethe’s two older children, Buglar and Howard flee from the house. In case of Buglar, the shattering of the mirror — which Beloved’s ghost breaks — is an indication for him to leave 124: “the sons, Howard and Buglar, had run away by the time they were thirteen years old—as soon as merely looking in a mirror shattered it (that was the symbol for Buglar)” (Morrison, *Beloved* 3). The shattering of the mirror can also be understood as a symbol of the haunting memory of Beloved’s murder by his mother. Beloved’s killing is haunting not simply because of the traumatic and destructiveness of the act but also because it results from extreme pessimism. Sethe devalued and completely disowned the idea of redemption and freedom when she killed Beloved. Elliott observes, “By killing Beloved, Sethe refuses to allow her daughter to be objectified and commodified by a colonialist 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” (3).
act is paradoxical, since one cannot save someone by killing them, but it also points to the level of derangement of thought brought on by the traumas of slavery.

Trauma is like the chemical process of the curdling of milk. It is irreversible. It stays and grows. It sets certain limits on the subject. Thus the questions that concern subjectivity are: how limits to subjectivity are set, how they are to be transgressed, and how subjectivity is solidified and made impenetrable. Feston-White asserts that essentializing mindsets have to be challenged and replaced by others:

Essentialized representations of blackness, established in both academic scholarship and popular culture, have stifled the African American quest for subjectivity and agency. To achieve a uniquely African American critical theory, which allows for self-definition outside of hegemonic limitations, the hegemony must be disrupted, the center must be dissolved, thus removing marginality. (1)

For marginalization to be countered, the centre must be made defunct. The very idea of the centre has to be challenged because when the centre ceases to exist, the margins too will collapse. Else, a metaphysical wormhole must be discovered that connects these parallel universes and equalizes them.

The role of language in countering and eradicating subaltern positions is central to Morrison’s writing. As Vaiva Bernatonyte-Azukiene points out, “Black language in Morrison’s novels functions not only as means of communication and passing on black history, but it also helps them to feel relieved of traumatic experiences” (75). Morrison understands that emancipation is contingent on language because it helps in preparing one’s own counter political discourse. Morrison disrupts culture either by seeing the shades in blackness, or blackness is associated with intelligence and good sense. This disruption is evident in her novels where essence is exposed as being non-valid through her complex, polygonous, many-sided understanding of human condition in general and African American lives in particular.

Morrison’s women and African characters deal with the debilitating effects of slavery on their psyches. The reader realizes that they can only cope with their subalternity by accepting their past and moving over it to create empowered
subjectivities. While in Morrison’s texts interpersonal ties are broken by the exigencies of slave life, these are all important in Tan’s texts, for subjectivities to emerge. Tan’s characters create stable selves through social and familial bonds.

2.3 Reaching Subjectivity through Ties in Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* (1998) and *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* (2001)

Amy Tan’s writing is autobiographical and she draws on her own experiences and those of several generations of women before her. By comprehending her personal history, she tries to grasp the lives of other Chinese immigrants by drawing on similarities between them. She weaves meanings out of her experiences but moves intellectually into the domain of humans who are not directly included within the contours of her own existence. In an interview with Gretchen Giles, she says that the questions she is grappling with in life “became a filter for looking at all my experiences and seeing them from different angles. That's what I think that a storyteller does, and underneath the surface of the story is a question or a perspective or a nagging little emotion, and then it grows” (Tan, “Interview” 2).

That Tan’s motivations to write are embedded deeply in her personal sphere becomes evident from the literary and other influences on her work that are listed on her official website. Some of these influences seem symbolic, impractical, spiritual and otherworldly, but these surely speak of the misshapenness of human existence, of its free-floating borderlessness and the idiosyncratic motivations of human lives.

In this list, Tan acknowledges the importance of ghosts to her life. These can be read symbolically as the hauntlings of her past. Both the novels taken up for study in the present thesis have the idea of ghosts deeply embedded in the building of their themes. Ghosts, as in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, become central in unveiling the haunting of the past and how their presence hinders authentic subjectivities from emerging. Amy Tan also works on how the American Dream is a vital motivator for the Asian diaspora, and how ideologically varied generations of Chinese people relate to this dream differently. The American Dream structures their selfhoods. Tan herself has been influenced by the Chinese interpretation of this dream, imbibing certain Chinese values while casting off others from her Americanized self. Though she
understands Chinese cultural values, she can only relate to them in a limited way. She fails to assimilate the Chinese cultural milieu because she has not lived in the Chinese space. There is frozenness about the parts of the novel set in China. On the contrary, the diasporic tales of the daughters in *The Joy Luck Club*, are charged with emotions. They are open ended tales.

Also, these influences on Tan’s life and writing are varied, ranging from familial ties to friendships, language, listening to stories, the American Dream and luck. This makes one realize that there is no singular hybridity due to the crossings between Chinese/American, coloured/white, and colonizer/colonized. Rather, even the hybrid is additionally a heterogeneous subject, a compound of different types of experiences. Often the Chinese diaspora in America is seen as being killjoys and people whose sole focus is academic or economic achievements. Tan challenges this ideology by presenting a balanced view of Chinese identity. She presents them as people who cannot be defined as being homogeneous. She presents them as humans who have their strengths and weaknesses. Critics are, however, divided in their interpretations of Tan’s work and some understand that her representations of Chinese people fuel stereotypes and are rather exotic. Tara Fickle observes in this regard, “What strikes me as especially interesting about the extremely polarized response to *The Joy Luck Club* is rather its persistent preoccupation with the serious and the playful—whether defined as the popular, the “easy,” the “palatable,” or the saccharine—as dialectical oppositions” (66).

Tan’s *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* and *The Joy Luck Club* both foreground the difficulty in establishing clear subjective positions and defining identities. In the diasporic scenario, the mother/daughter bond is a source of solidarity that aims to simplify existence and helps mothers and daughters transcend confusion and enter the territory of self knowledge. In *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* the oppression of women existing in patriarchal setups and in diaspora is simultaneously charted out. How these women relate cross generationsally to each other is consequential in forming meanings of their existence. The daughter Ruth draws on her legacy derived from her mother to make sense of her diasporic life and the mother, in turn, draws on the legacy of her mother to make sense of patriarchal discourse operating in her life. In *The Joy Luck Club*, one important aspect of the stories of the mothers and the daughters is their feminist perspective. Tan draws on these stories to derive holistic answers to
problems of women’s existence. In both the novels, she tries to take the diasporic back to China to understand her existence by incorporating the missing strands of China from their identity. The mother-daughter relation becomes an impetus to move from vacancy to relative fulfilment.

The mother/daughter relationship is, however, complex. Mothers and daughters fail one another at several points in *The Joy Luck Club*. In the very first chapter of the novel, the anecdote about Suyuan Woo reveals her struggle for survival during the time of war. Her struggle is synonymous with the general struggle of all living beings. It is heightened to tragic proportions by the fact that she left her two daughters back in Kweilin, as she struggled up the path herself. This becomes a source of guilt in her story which haunts her for the rest of her life, probably becoming the reason for her undoing and eventual death. She feels that this one incident has rendered her incomplete and creates a demeaning split between her two lives. Her friend says about her: “‘Your mother was a very strong woman, a good mother. She loved you very much, more than her own life. And that’s why you can understand why a mother like this could never forget her other daughters. She knew they were alive, and before she died she wanted to find her daughters in China’” (Tan, “Joy Luck” 39).

An-Mei realizes in *The Joy Luck Club* that forgetting one’s pain is like forgetting a part of one’s self and inhibits holistic subjectivity from emerging. She forgets about her mother and therefore forgets a vital part of her self. Her existence is also peripheral because of this handicap. She, as a child and a daughter, exists at the periphery of the family. She has to get reunited with her mother to feel the full force of her life. When she forgets her mother she relates it to a fatal wound: “In two years’ time my scar became pale and shiny and I had no memory of my mother. That is the way it is with a wound. The wound begins to close in on itself, to protect what is hurting so much. And once it is closed, you no longer see what is underneath, what started the pain” (Tan, “Joy Luck” 47).

The idea of remembering oneself is once again voiced by Lindo Jong, who observes, living in a misogynist society, that she must be true to her own self. Not forgetting herself in the exigencies of her subaltern existence, she makes a personal promise that she would remember her own priorities and dreams:
I asked myself, What is true about a person? Would I change in the same way the river changes color but still be the same person?... I threw my head back and smiled proudly to myself. And then I draped the large embroidered red scarf over my face and covered these thoughts up. But underneath the scarf I still knew who I was. I made a promise to myself: I would always remember my parent’s wishes but I would never forget myself. (Tan, “Joy Luck” 58)

Several of the Chinese women characters in The Joy Luck Club, at one juncture or the other, undertake a self appraisal by connecting their lives in China to their lives as diasporics. What emerges is a struggle to not only speak, but to convey and pass on. These women have been taught to live like “shadows,” at the margins of existence. Their existence is fluid and unimportant. Even in their own homes, they feel they have no space they can call their own. Ying-Ying St. Clair says: “All these years I kept my true nature hidden, running along like a small shadow so nobody could catch me. And because I moved so secretly, now my daughter does not see me… And I want to tell her this: We are lost, she and I, unseen and not seeing, unheard and not hearing, unknown by others.” (Tan, “Joy Luck” 67).

Women are lost, as Ying-Ying asserts. They have no place to call their own and hence there is nowhere they can go. In Tan’s novels chosen for this study, the characters make bonds of solidarity so that even if they do not belong somewhere, they can belong to someone who is like them. Yet the author does not oversimplify the idea of solidarity. When Tan talks about Ying-Ying being unheard, she also talks of her as being un-hearing. Not hearing another woman or even her own self hinders the subject from entering into solidarity. It is also a voicing of misunderstandings in human relations, particularly in this context, the relations between mothers and daughters. Belinda Marie Balraj states in her research paper, “In the selected novels of Amy Tan, she focuses on communication among women and how women fail to feel connected to other women in their families” (306).

The roles that are thrust on women define their sense of self. True subjectivity can only emerge once the fixed definitions of what a woman should be like are replaced by one’s sense of being an individual unfettered by patriarchy. The characters move towards becoming authentic selves by means of asking questions,
which are forbidden by patriarchy. In these attempts, the mothers teach their
daughters ways through which they can strengthen themselves. Waverly is taught
“invisible strength” by her mother: “I was six when my mother taught me the art of
invisible strength. It was a strategy for winning arguments, respect from others, and
eventually, though neither of us knew it at the time, chess games” (Tan, “Joy Luck”
89). The very term “invisible strength” is paradoxical because one often associates
strength with something that can be seen. It is a subtle strength that emerges from the
knowledge of one’s oppressed existence. Blight comments on women’s silencing
when she says, “The cultural training of submissive Chinese women runs throughout
the older women’s stories. They were taught that girls were to be quiet and obedient
or they would shame their families. Tan depicts the aging mothers as wanting their
daughters to have a voice, to have choices, to cultivate strength” (3). The mothers
train their daughters in strength by moulding them as young children into self-reliant
and thinking individuals.

Following Waverly, who has a talent for playing chess, Jing Mei is forced into
learning the piano and exploring her talents. Her mother sees her life as being
unfulfilled unless she excels at something: “My mother believed you could be good at
anything you wanted to be in America. You could open a restaurant. You could work
for the government and get good retirement. You could buy a house with almost no
money down. You could become rich. You could become instantly famous” (Tan,
“Joy Luck” 132). This is her way of passing on strength to her daughter. The very
idea of perfection is grilled, as it were, into her existence. Throughout the novel,
however, she is dreaming of being somewhere else and doing something else. A
certain identity is imposed on her by her mother. She, however, feels inadequate in
the face of this imposition and after a few initial attempts to gratify her mother’s
ideas, she gives up the challenge of learning to play the piano because she knows that
it is not meant for her: “‘I’m not going to play anymore,’ I said nonchalantly. ‘Why
should I? I’m not a genius’” (Tan, “Joy Luck” 141).

The book Twenty Six Malignant Gates mentioned in The Joy Luck Club refers
to the dangers that can befall children. It carries, however, at a symbolic level, a
subterranean meaning pertaining to the threats of non-identity. The physical threats
are, at another level, harbingers of threats to their subjectivities. Tan’s novels are
etched with looming death and a fear of it, as is symbolized in the present Chinese book. Belinda Balraj asserts:

Amy Tan seems comfortable to use the Chinese Ghost and Kitchen God for most of her novels. Death seems an inevitable scene in her novels and she often relates this to her female characters. In The Joy Luck Club, the women seem to have an unfinished work but are unable to express themselves to their daughters or mothers. There does not seem to be a happy ending for these women in this novel as opposed to the Kitchen God. In the Kitchen God, there seems to be a closer understanding between the mother and daughter but towards the end, there are more questions than answers left. (309)

The Joy Luck Club is divided into four sections, that reveal consecutively, the lives of mothers and daughters as children and then as grown women. It traces the development of subjectivities over time. Also, the novel becomes cyclical as we see the daughters fighting their battles against versions of helplessness and incompleteness that were also earlier felt by their mothers. The idea of motherly guidance and the daughter’s uncovering of something that was hitherto inaccessible are evident in the mother/daughter relation. Both have their own ways of making their subjectivities emanate. While the mothers reluctantly accept their daughters who they think have not lived up to their expectations, the daughters act out their own versions of self exploration. They do not feel as stranded as their mothers who had had to face stricter versions of the patriarchal system.

The mothers often develop a veritable intuition from years of reading signs of threat in their struggles to emerge from anonymity. This sixth sense gives them confidence and a subtle sense of agency. They have learnt how to go about fulfilling their wishes without threatening either patriarchy or their own sense of self. This is not merely a balancing act but also their version of exerting control over their lives in a patriarchal system. Lena says about her mother: “To this day, I believe my mother has the mysterious ability to see things before they happen. She has a Chinese saying for what she knows. Chunwang chihan: If the lips are gone, the teeth will be cold. Which means, I suppose, one thing is always the result of another” (Tan 149).
As the daughters in the novel grow and gain strength, a pattern comes to light: loss of innocence is a natural process, but maturity and search for subjectivity are conscious and methodical. They are a part of the ongoing process of conscious growth. The rift that arises between the two generations of women in *The Joy Luck Club* occurs in the difference of their place that moulds their psyches as well as their ways of relating to the American diasporic space.

Lost in their suppositions, the daughters fail to see the sacrifices their mothers had made. The mothers give up a part of themselves to make their daughters’ lives more adequate and freer of patriarchal stranglehold. Ann-Mei’s mother commits suicide so that her children can live better lives. She is the third wife of a rich man and her position as a concubine denies her the more respectful and comfortable life of the first wife. She feels that her children are being discriminated against. To restore order into their lives, and to gain for them a social status, she gives up her own life:

she would rather kill her own weak spirit so she could give me a stronger one… because we both knew this: that on the third day after someone dies, the soul comes back to settle scores. In my mother’s case this would be the first day of the lunar new year. And because it is the new year, all debts must be paid, or disaster and misfortune would follow. So on that day, Wu Tsing, fearful of my mother’s vengeful spirit… promised her visiting ghost that he would raise Saudi and me as honored children. (Tan, “Joy Luck” 240)

Subjectivity is not simply an act of struggling to achieve freedom for the self. Rather, it also exists in the sphere of sacrifice for people close to oneself. In the above case it is a sacrifice for one’s children.

*The Joy Luck Club* comes full circle as one finds a conclusion, if not a closure, for the stories. The last story extends from the first. It is the only story where Ann-Mei goes back to China to fulfil her mother’s last wish. There she reinvents a severed part of her mother’s life, as if from the stem cells that the mother had left in China. She goes to meet the daughters that her mother had abandoned before she came to America. In finding her mother’s roots, she also finds her own and it is an establishment of a hitherto unwanted and unclaimed connection. When she meets her sisters, Jing-Mei observes: “I look at their faces again and I see no trace of my mother
in them. Yet they still look familiar. And now I also see what part of me is Chinese. It is so obvious. It is my family. It is in our blood. After all these years it can finally be let go” (Tan, “Joy Luck” 287).

Tan’s novels reveal the hybridity of identity of diasporic subjects. Her novel, *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, is replete with culturally hybrid subjects who gather strength from their hybridity. The oppressive experiences of the various characters engender in them a continuous strife for subjectivity. LuLing in *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* continually holds back the emergence of her subjectivity. She finds herself incapable of replacing and re-establishing her memories in the diasporic space. The story of her life before she comes to America remains a secret. It is not out of shame that she does not utter this tale, but more out of a deep-rooted pride that comes from doing great things. It is as if this greatness is lost in her transcendence of the Oriental space into the Western milieu. Here, her stories are meaningless. They are told in Chinese and no one can relate to them. Ruth tries to read her memoir but is unsuccessful: “They were pages written in Chinese, her mother’s writing. LuLing had given them to her five or six years before… Ruth had tried to decipher the pages… ‘These are the things I know are true,’ the first sentence read. That had taken Ruth an hour to translate” (Tan, “The Bonesetter’s” 12). She, however, feels the need to record these stories in writing when she realizes that she is losing her memory and there is no way other way to do justice to them. When she passes on these stories to her daughter, she intends to establish two links, namely—links with her past and with her daughter. Both these aspects are closely linked to her sense of self. She has made her subjectivity resurface in this writing of her life. This unrevealed aspect of her existence makes us re-imagine LuLing in a completely new light. She carries secrets that she cannot easily share because she thinks that no one would understand her. The subject has his/her internal growth that lies beyond the control of the patriarchal and colonial oppressor. It is these superstructural gaps that ensure the relatively autonomous existence of the subject despite the oppressive base. This lies in their self-consciousness that operates outside of ideology and the dominant discourse. LuLing taps these inner resources through her memoir.

Ruth is a ghost writer. She understands the importance of words and yet is completely unaware when it comes to knowing words that matter to her. She has no favourite word, perhaps because life is not static, and is rather complex and fleeting.
For Art, unlike Ruth, life is not mundane. He, unlike Ruth, has a favourite word and it is “vapors.” His explanation of it is almost ethereal: “It appeals to the senses... It can be opaque but never solid. You can feel it but it has no permanent shape. It might be hot or cold” (Tan, “The Bonesetter’s” 27). We come to see that he is sorted out and has an untangled life. Ruth, on the other hand, being an immigrant, is lost in her chaotic existence. Indeed, several facets of her existence require and, at the same time, problematize the emergence of her subjectivity.

Her profession of giving words to other authors does little for Ruth. She becomes a voice for others, but ironically, loses her own. Her loss of voice, in the beginning, is a metaphorical loss of her subjective voice. She naturalizes this voicelessness and makes her silence a trope for search of her self. Her silent periods become, for her, a form of reimagining and emergence of subjectivity: “The following August, rather than just wait for muteness to strike, Ruth explained to her clients and friends that she was taking a planned weeklong retreat into verbal silence. “It’s a yearly ritual,” she said, “to sharpen my consciousness about words and their necessity.”... She made her voiceless state a decision, a matter of will, and not a disease or a mystery” (Tan, “The Bonesetter’s” 10).

Ruth helps write self help books, and in unknotting lives of other people she tries to untangle her own. It is not, however, such an easy process. As the novel proceeds and Ruth reads her mother’s memoir, it comes to be the ultimate self help book for her. Rather than being the theoretical ranting like the books Ruth writes, this book carries the ultimate link that can stabilize several other conjectures of her life. Ruth wants some form of external fulfilment like praise, acceptance, and regard. However, she only gets fulfilment from resources within herself.

Language is deeply tied to subjectivity. One thinks differently in different languages since culture is expressed through language: “Writing Chinese characters,’ her mother told her, ‘is entirely different from writing English words. You think differently. You feel differently.’ And it was true: LuLing was different when she was writing or painting. She was calm, organized, and decisive” (Tan, “The Bonesetter’s” 54).

The author shows Ruth as a perpetual teenager. In fact, in the last section of the book, when Ruth goes to live with her mother, she feels like an adolescent lying
down in her old bed: “At night, as Ruth lay in her old bed, she felt she had come back to her adolescence in the guise of an adult. She was the same person and yet she was not. Or perhaps she was two versions of herself, Ruth 1969 and Ruth 1999, one more innocent and the other more perceptive, one needier, the other more self-sufficient, both of them fearful” (Tan, “The Bonesetter’s” 315).

The images of ghosts, vapours and steam are very prominent in The Bonesetter’s Daughter. These are middle states and are symbolic of the hybridity of various characters. Bao Bomu exists between being married and being single, and also between being a mother and nurse. Similarly LuLing and Ruth exist in an in-between state of being diasporics. Self understanding for them is evasive and becomes something that does not readily come about. It is almost ghostly and shapeless. Ghosts, similarly, evade human understanding, as do death and suicide. These are the motifs that haunt the text as it were. To find one’s subjectivity one, must first put these in perspective, understand the ghosts that haunt one’s world.

Tan’s novels are largely feminist. The Bonesetter’s Daughter traces the difficulties that women face in a misogynist culture and how they surface out of these difficulties. The novel is driven, as it were, by this emergence of subjectivity that is closely linked to memory. One is urged to observe the multivalent oppression of women in relation to various patriarchal institutions like family, schools, military and marriage etc. LuLing fights against her dehumanization that is most apparently reflected in her desertion by her family, almost as if she were an animal. She has the same fate as her mother who too is deserted and never gets a burial. Bao Bomu’s body is pushed off a cliff into oblivion, with total disregard for dignity and any sense of humanity. LuLing is burdened with her past where she has to face roadblocks as a woman. She understands that she must tell the stories so as to pull her mother’s memory out of oblivion into the domain of existence. The Bonesetter's Daughter is about three radical women, each fighting different aspects and stages of patriarchy. These women characters are involved in a search for their true selves; sometimes it means finding one’s self embedded in the mother’s self: “‘She’s down there,’ said GaoLing ‘your Precious Auntie is lying in the End of the World.’… That day I went to the End of the World to look for her… I searched for her until dusk. By then my eyes were swollen with dust and tears. I never found her. And as I climbed back up, I
was a girl who had lost part of herself in the End of the World” (Tan, “The Bonesetter’s” 222).

The title, The Bonesetter’s Daughter is symbolic of female agency and the emergence of subjectivity. Bones keep the body together, unified into a form. The novel is based on women belonging to a clan of bonesetters. Their struggles are struggles to identify connections, that are metaphorically already in them, they being the bonesetter’s daughters. Napat Tangapiwut asserts that Chinese women, especially the younger generations, deal with their identity crisis by having faith in the self, “They no longer accept their fate under the traditional stereotypes of gender roles; on the contrary, they accept their fate as defined by themselves and based on a strong faith on their potential to articulate their need for self-esteem” (38). Subjectivity, then, becomes something they must find embedded deep within themselves, in the very body of their existence. The cultural fabric only serves as a form of initiator of this search that must be directed within. Tammy S. Conrad concludes her reading of Tan’s The Joy Luck Club when she observes that Tan’s characters are not stereotypes, and challenge normalized rationality about them, “Her mothers and daughters are not dragon ladies or geisha girls, and characterizing these women as agents of their own circumstances deconstructs and reconstructs Western stereotypes. Tan engages in deconstruction and reconstruction when addressing Chinese patriarchal myths” (Conrad 98). Tan’s characters are complex beings who have hidden lives. They are, however, characters who have inbuilt strengths and have learnt value systems that counter colonial and patriarchal forces and make their movement from subalternity to agency possible.

2.4 Trials Towards Subjectivity in Gurnah’s Paradise (1994) and Desertion (2005)

Abdulrazak Gurnah published his first novel in 1987 when most of the originally colonized world had been at least politically liberated. The decolonization process was, however, far from complete. Neocolonization had replaced colonization and power tussles — some of them amounting to wars — were operating in Africa, as elsewhere too. There was a clear, hegemonic Westernization that was happening. America became a metaphor for advancement and a giant figure that the East looked up to. At the same time, several movements got underway that challenged this
abrasive Western culture that was eroding Eastern values. Some movements include the call for going back to the Vedas and the Chipko Movement in India, the Islamization Movement happening in Britain, or the many relatively minor projects that women and men across the world have undertaken to disentangle themselves from the Western stranglehold. Writing at such a time when colonization had developed multiple meanings and had become increasingly adaptive and immune to resistance, Gurnah, through his writings, tries to understand the several layers of colonization. Eric Falk defines how Gurnah’s novels deal with the ideas of subject formation and subjectivity by not fitting these concepts into the theoretical frame of postcolonial theory. He transcends the territory of race and nation to consider the more personal space of family, community and home. Falk writes, “Gurnah’s fiction, although entrenched in and concerned with the history of a geographical area, is more than a reflection of that history and place. It offers perspectives on subject formation that contest prevailing models based on nation, family, or race” (27). Through careful and in-depth reading of colonization as it impacts one’s personal spheres, Gurnah understands neocolonization better. Neocolonization takes root in the subjects’ personal space. It works by bombarding the subject’s personal space with values of Western culture. Thus, to untangle the West’s stranglehold, transformation should happen not just through national policy making but also at the level of the subject’s very conscious understanding of her cultural milieu. This struggle, in some sense, is not national but familial and communitarian. Gurnah develops this understanding and responds to it through his writing.

The victimization of the subaltern classes is rationalized through their acquiescing to it by accepting their victimhood as being essential. This is most apparent in Desertion where Rehana is victimized as a woman of colour by a white man and two generations of women after her carry the stigma of her victimized position. Amin says about Jamila: “I’ve seen her pass by, and then heard people say who she was, what her name was. But I don’t remember hearing anything bad about her, if that’s what you mean. Only that her grandmother was a European man’s woman you know, his mistress,’ he said” (Gurnah, Desertion 166). For the characters in Desertion, subjectivity becomes all the more problematic because the self always has gaps and evades comprehension. Desertion retells the history of colonized people in diasporic locations and their own homeland and challenges the dominant
viewpoints pertaining to their existence. The novel generates empathy by stressing on an alternate history that records the troubled and invisible lives of its characters in the face of oppression. Colonization operates at several levels in the novel and one sees how it affects its characters both under the European rule and the post-independence Zanzibar torn by civil war and dictatorial rule. The denial of the subaltern’s humanity by the colonizer is a desertion in a metaphorical sense. Adam Mars-Jones observes, “The baleful title word of Abdulrazak Gurnah’s seventh novel, Desertion, presides over the book from a strange distance, never quite attaching itself to the characters or their doings. There are men who leave women in the lurch, but there are other leavings that may be culpable in their own way” (Mars-Jones 1).

Pearce, who fires up the tragic chain of events in Rehana’s life in the novel Desertion, tries to sweep over the dichotomy between East and West. He sees the orient as a natural space and not just in comparison to the West. He is an orientalist who has an urge to experience Africa by knowing its land, language and people. His relation with Rehana too is a means to know Africa, and not simply a love relationship. Elekke Boehmer points out, “Laden with colonial allusions ranging from Stevenson to Richard Burton’s explorations, Pearce's first moves towards his lover rehearse the West's blundering incursion into lives it was to change utterly, despite its sometimes good intentions. To this extent, it is predictable that the affair is doomed from the start” (2). Rehana becomes an input for Pearce that he can discard at will: “He left once, and then returned, but then left again. It’s something that he returned, that he was torn about leaving her, she said. It makes you think he must have loved her, even though he still left. At some point, he must have come to his senses and made his way home” (Gurnah, Desertion 238). Gurnah seems to be suggesting that the Western orientalist does not fall in love with the orient but is merely infatuated with it. Pearce has a double personality, a real and an imaginary self. His identity is based on the verity of his being an orientalist. The facets of his double personality are driven by his need to discover the East as a historian, which, on one level, initiates an urge in him to exploit the native as an intellectual resource. The author refers to his “craftiness” which overshadows his humility and ease with the native, and avowed concern for them: “He knew how susceptible powerless people were to such banal gestures, how much they valued appearance of generosity and humility” (Gurnah,
Desertion 114). Pearce despite being an orientalist remains a colonizer and the creator of false discourses as a historian.

Colonization is consequential in not only creating subaltern subjects, but also debases the colonizer. Colonization becomes a wounding, insensitive act that not only affects the colonized but also the colonizer in a negative way since it is ultimately something to be ashamed of. Pearce says: “‘I think in time we’ll come to see what we’e doing in places like these less heroically… I think in time we’ll come to be ashamed of some of the things we have done’” (Gurnah, Desertion 85). Colonization is something the west believes is ingrained in definitions of their own self. It becomes an element of shame in their definitions as to who they are. Frederick in Desertion describes his wife’s reaction to colonization: “‘She is a poet,’ Frederick said, ‘and something in her revolted at how the rigours of empire degraded finer feelings, the way it made us into charlatans and bullies, as she put it, brought out the worst in us, she said. She would not relent,’ he said, and nodded tersely.” (Gurnah, Desertion 116).

In the third section of Desertion that involves Rashid’s diasporic experiences, it is noteworthy that Rashid understands more clearly from a distance his position of being a subaltern citizen of a colonized nation. The third world he had never clearly seen comes rushing into his consciousness at the moment of his exit from it. His selfhood is shaped by the ideas he learns about the place he comes from, but no longer belongs to: “So I had to learn about that, and about imperialism and how deeply the narratives of our inferiority and the aptness of European overlordship had bedded down in what passed for knowledge of the world.” (Gurnah, Desertion 215).

Home is a vital part of subjectivity because it is a place of return and a place of acceptance. Diaspora becomes a traumatic experience because this place of return is changed into a place of no return. It becomes exclusive and remote. One realizes too that the home of subjectivity, that is, the seat of subjectivity, is destroyed and must be reframed. The reframing of subjectivity can only come from some sort of burial or a form of dissimulation of one’s original self. Diasporic experience comes with a sense of exclusion from both the worlds. One becomes a free-floating entity. This prolongs forever the time of taking root. Rashid describes his experience as: “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?” (Gurnah, Desertion 221).

*Desertion* is replete with journeys and wandering and initiates several modes through which subjectivity emerges: from the historicizing of Pearce to Rehana’s bold step to exit home and social norms, Rashid’s criticism of life and literature, Amin’s memoir writing, and Farida’s poetry. These are modes of movement as well as metaphorical journeys that bring the characters closer to their subjectivities. Many characters give us insights into subjectivity through their individual grappling with it. Individually, their life coping strategies are distinct and incomplete. Within the structure of the novel, they acquire linkages and demand to be grasped in totality for the reader to establish her meaning.

Space is politically moulded. It is made up of several cultural relations between the entities—living and non-living—that make it. Yusuf in *Paradise*, feels oppressed and the superego that controls his actions is most starkly represented in Aziz’s character. He is so overwhelmed by his presence that the very thought of harming him makes him anguished. Yusuf has an ambivalent relation to the colonizer, that is, Aziz. It is a form of love/hate relation. Also, throughout the novel, Yusuf is faced with a sort of disorientation with his lived experiences. He is literally and metaphorically lost in the interstices of his confusing situation. His initial awe of Aziz who colonizes him stays with him for a long time. He admires his colonizer to such an extent that he is confused between allegiance to him and repulsion of him. He is initially taught subservience to Aziz by his father: “Yusuf always enjoyed his visits. His father said they brought honour on them because he was a rich and renowned merchant—*tajiri makubwa*—but that was not all, welcome though honour always was” (Gurnah, Paradise 3). He is disoriented and his actions are influenced by factors outside of his being. Yusuf, in the latter half of the novel is already moving towards agency. Agency, however, is not easily won. Yusuf must exit the place accorded to him by virtue of his class. He exits the space of class domination when he joins the German army, but has now entered another form of domination. He has left one political space to enter another that is equally controlling. Yusuf is symbolically hailed by Aziz. His identity is defined by Aziz. He is subjectified by Aziz’s gaze. To
become an agent, he must return this gaze and question the modes of identity thrust upon him by forces outside of his self.

Yusuf, ever since his loss of home and exile in Aziz’s home, puts in a tremendous effort to find himself. He undertakes insightful journeys, falls in love and tries to understand life through religion. His self, however, despite his efforts, remains essentially fissured and incomplete. That link required to provide uniformity to his varied experiences does not come about. He has to find strength within his self in order to find the core of his existence. He remains, till the end of the novel, a perpetual traveller. His is a subjective travel from without to within.

In *Paradise*, Aziz’s wife seems to be, like Yusuf, grappling with questions of subjectivity. Nevertheless, she needs someone to find this subjectivity for her. Her subjectivity requires a channel to emerge through. She chooses Yusuf to be this channel. Her relation to Yusuf is that of analysand/analyzer. Their meetings are like psychoanalytical sessions. Her talks with Yusuf lack the proverbial couch but her telling and Yusuf’s interpreting bring to mind Freud’s cathartic methods. She experiences transference of emotions that she ought to have for Aziz onto Yusuf which is evident from her infatuation with him. She forces herself on Yusuf: “Her voice was rich with feeling, and her smile grew softer as she spoke. Yusuf could not be sure what she wanted him to do, but he could not mistake the look of passion and longing on her face” (Gurnah, *Paradise* 236). She tries to intrude upon Yusuf’s space and in turn mortifies it, so as to rejuvenate her own space that is otherwise lonely.

For Gurnah, the colonizer exerts a complete control over the subject and is ruthless in his colonizing missions. The colonizers are mobilized by their appetite for goods and land but work in a very organized way, stifling the colonized through their strong military, religious and cultural hold.

There are three categories of inhabitants living in Zanzibar, the country where the novel *Paradise* is set. At the lowest level are the natives, living in precivilizational surroundings but leading fulfilling lives. Their lives, however, are occasionally interfered with and disrupted by the colonizers from Arabia and Europe. The Arabians are colonizers in a more limited sense, because being not as powerful as the Europeans, they allow more room for agency and freedom. The Europeans are ultimately in a more influential position than either the Arabs or the natives and it is they who solve any disputes that may arise between the two ethnic groups. It is also
the Europeans, who in a way, homogenize the two groups by terming them as ethnic, coloured and ultimately making them subjects in the political sense of the term. Anne Ajulu Okungu understands this difference between the various layers of the subalterns as being contingent on the formation of each other’s subjectivity, “The binary presentation of ‘the self’ and ‘the other’ in Gurnah’s works presents an interaction between two ‘subjects’, therefore relating to the concept of intersubjectivity. He does this by focusing on individuals and highlighting the differences between them and how they interact with their ‘others’” (44).

However, Gurnah articulates through Simba Mwene that humans are all ultimately equal and there is no difference between the Arabs and the Africans. It is this viewpoint that stimulates them to pick up the dead natives in the destroyed village and bury them: “‘We shouldn’t leave them like this,’ Simba Mwene said, his voice low… ‘We are their brothers, from the blood of the same Adam who fathered all of us’… They dug a shallow pit at the end of the village… the wails of the villagers rose inconsolably as the pit was filled in” (Gurnah, Paradise 128).

Later in the novel, when Chatu attacks the troupe because they are merchants, they homogenize a group on the basis of ethnicity and profession. In a way, they hint at a relation that all humanity shares. In several instances, however, the links between humanity are challenged. A particular essence is bestowed on certain groups and they are segregated and dehumanized. Repeatedly in the novel, people talk about other ethnicities as being almost sub-human or super-human, even magical and out of this world: “Imagine that God should create creatures like that! They look like something made out of sin,” one of the porters said, a young man who was always first to speak. “Don’t they look vicious?” “How do they get themselves to look so red?” another porter asked. “It must be the blood they drink. It’s true, isn’t it? That they drink blood” (Gurnah 59).

Subjectivity is also defined in terms of religion, not as something man-made but as a gift of God. Also, the idea of God that the West and the colonizer hold is destabilized by the idea of God possessed by the Africans who live in the forest. Their idea of God is more like a soul that exists in the various living and non-living entities in nature. This idea is conducive to their way of life, though it is regarded with contempt by the colonizer, who cannot assimilate any version of religion or civilization other than that of Christianity and the stereotyped Western civilization. Religion teaches subjects to be selfless, to live in self-denial for atonement. Religion,
in this text, is an ideological state apparatus that influences the psyches of subjects. It teaches the subjects that their colonization is actually normal. However, religion also gives the subject a culture and an ideology that simplifies life and gives a sense of purpose to an inherently chaotic existence. The idea of Paradise in religion and literature has been variously interpreted. Gurnah’s novel, according to Fawzia Mustafa, “also explores the concept of ‘paradise,’ not only as it has been articulated within Islamic discourses, the religion of most of the characters from both the coastal region and at the trading posts along the caravan’s routes, but also as a riposte to Conrad’s metaphor” (233). Gurnah proposes a non-essential vision of Africa. His Africa is neither exotic nor dark. It has its own problems just like the West, but it cannot be reduced to a darkness. Calling Africa “Paradise” is an assertion of the reverence to home—that nurtures and provides unconditional acceptance.

In Paradise, Yusuf is in a way deserted by his parents and given up. He loses the only home he knows and this engenders in him a wish to know where he belongs. He is so far removed from his childhood home in space and time that it loses its authentic hold over him as a home. He must look for other homes because the breaking of the personal ties with his family is so intense that the possibility of return is unthinkable. As a result of Yusuf’s traumatic severing of his childhood and family ties, he remains a wanderer without answers. Gurnah says about him, towards the end of the novel:

The Seyyid could travel deep into strange lands in a cloud of perfume, armed only with bags of trinkets and a sure knowledge of his superiority. The white man in the forest feared nothing as he sat under his flag, ringed by armed soldiers. But Yusuf had neither a flag nor righteous knowledge with which to claim superior honour, and he thought he understood that the small world he knew was the only one available to him. (Gurnah, Paradise 237)

Yusuf finds himself in an even more oppressed condition after his expulsion from the home space. The psychological trauma of separation, although it is never elaborated in the novel by Gurnah, becomes apparent from the constant confusion and loneliness felt by Yusuf in later life: “He would go away, there was nothing simpler. Somewhere where he could escape the oppressive claims of everything made on him. But he knew that a hard lump of loneliness had long ago formed in his displaced heart, that wherever he went it would be with him, to diminish and disperse any plot
he could hatch for small fulfilment” (Gurnah, Paradise 236). The displacement and loneliness that he feels are debilitating to his growth. He feels trapped within his life and has nowhere to go after his separation from his family. He remembers the day of his separation very clearly but has no apparent emotional arousal at it. He is traumatized but cannot understand his trauma clearly because he is too naïve to think rationally about it. Yusuf finds it difficult to associate himself with any single place. He is misplaced and never really placed anywhere. He is also always on the go. Ironically, he also does not have a face though he is the protagonist. While the other important characters in the novel are described vividly, Yusuf is not given any physical description. He, however, has a vision of a better life and this vision does motivate him to leave Aziz’s stranglehold:

If this is Hell, then leave. And let me come with you. They’ve raised us to be timid and obedient, to honour them even as they misuse us. Leave and let me come with you. We’re both in the middle of nowhere. Where else can be worse? There would be no walled garden there, where ever we go, with sturdy cypresses and restless bushes, and fruit trees and unexpectedly bright flowers. Nor the bitter scent of orange sap in the day and the deep embrace of jasmine fragrance at night... It would be like banishment, but how could it be worse than this? [emphasis in original] (Gurnah, Paradise 233)

Yusuf’s transformation into an agent strongly takes on momentum from this interior monologue. He has, now, a clearer vision of what he wants to evade and what he wants to achieve. The path to reach this remains unknown, but his determination to be free is clear.

In Paradise, Yusuf finds freedom the hard way, much like Rehana does in Desertion. Both have an inbuilt need to listen to their needs and emotions and both are disturbed by and remain unfulfilled in their narrow existence. Rehana becomes a flag-bearer of agency for other women after her. Her descendants live relatively free lives—as compared to other women of Zanzibar—by following in her steps. Like Rehana, Yusuf also disregards custom when he flees from Aziz to get freedom. Both Farida and Amin break political and legal barriers when they record their experiences during a time of civil strife. Through the lives of these and other characters, Gurnah enables the reader to experience through his texts the operations of suppression as well as the modes that lead to the development of healthy subjectivities. Gurnah also
engages the reader in understanding several philosophical issues like freedom, comradeship, feminist agency and the role of writing in creating self-reliant subjectivities.

2.5 Conclusion

While Tan’s and Gurnah’s characters try to embrace their distorted worlds to become complete and whole, Morrison’s characters grapple endlessly in the confused terrain of their trauma to understand their self and assimilate into it the debilitating experiences of slave life. Gurnah takes on the tripartite fixities of African culture in the division into the African, Arab and European races by analyzing the diffusely varied lives of different characters. While Paradise (1994) is a bildungsroman novel about the development of a male character, Yusuf, Desertion (2005), on the other hand, is the tale of Rehana and the narrator’s family. Morrison, unlike Gurnah is not interested in the simple subjective development of over-arching characters. On the contrary, her focus is on recording the micro histories of slavery. Clearly, Sethe’s story is inspired from the true story of a slave called Margaret Gaarner. Like Gurnah, Morrison also explores the concern that journeys are essential for self appraisal and understanding, primarily through the character of Florens who undertakes a journey to find her lover, which is a metaphor for black identity. Morrison understands subjectivity as a process that begins from denial of freedom and a lack of fulfilment in life. Tan’s characters also engage in an understanding of their selfhoods by reinstating personal and familial history into their sense of the self. Unlike Gurnah’s novels, where characters understand their lives through extrication from familial ties, in Tan, this happens through a restoring of ties, particularly the establishment of the mother/daughter bond. Tan writes from her personal experience as a second generation diasporic. She is not interested in political events as Gurnah is. Gurnah reaches an understanding of the relation of the political and the personal. Morrison reaches some kind of solace through understanding and recording slavery. The similarity in the novels by the three novelists rings out clear. The novels taken up for this study trace some kind of trajectory from not knowing to knowing, from lack of personal resources to fulfilment, from confusion of thought to guidance in actions, and from subalternity to agency.
Subjectivity is a major concern for human beings, and almost all humans experience some form of subversion of subjectivity. In oppressed conditions, this concern is heightened for the subject, as she tries to grapple with the threat of dehumanization. In the face of trauma, the questions of survival become all the more vital. Traumatic histories generate critical thinking more readily than rationalizing about existence from a comfort zone. The subject begins to analyze her surroundings and rationalize about them because of some form of discontent in them. Sometimes the very extent of trauma makes the subject withdraw into a closed off psychological space where her mauled past is repressed to the unconscious and cannot be assimilated into the conscious corpus of her history.