
**Scars That Speak and Women Who Rise: *Tess, Sethe, Offred, and Mariam*
Defying Violence and Claiming Power**¹**Ariharan S**Ph.D. Research Scholar, School of Liberal Arts and Humanities, Woxsen University,
Telangana, Hyderabad,²**Prof. Dr. K.M. Parivelan**Professor and Associate Dean, School of Liberal Arts and Humanities, Woxsen University,
Telangana, Hyderabad**Abstract:**

In modern studies, it has been acknowledged that literary representations of gendered violence do not only mirror the past, but project ways out of trauma to agency. The given paper will discuss four archetypal female protagonists Tess Durbeyfield (Tess of the d'Urbervilles), Sethe (Beloved), Offred (The Handmaid Tale), and Mariam (A Thousand Splendid Suns), who experience sexual and physical abuse but manage to overcome the adversary by means of strength. The analysis explains the way in which the inner strength and decisions of each of the heroines turn victimhood into defiance using feminist literary and trauma theories. Victorian fallen lady Tess still remains dignified and morally consistent despite being assaulted by Alec D'Urberville and being judged as a falling woman who has yet to find her own voice, and indeed, instinctive self-respect is prevalent even in her tragedy. Sethe is an enslaved mother who manages to escape the dehumanization of slavery by directing the love of motherhood in radical instigations of defense and memory, and Morrison depicts her motherhood as a rebellion against his oppressor. In the dystopian Gileade presented by Atwood, Offred opposes institutional rape by forming illegal community and constructing inner world: according to Hansot, Offred is determined to survive and her inner self-constructions are the possible form of resistance. In wartime Afghanistan, Mariam faces spousal abuse and social disdain, but at the end, makes self-sacrifice to save Laila by killing her abuser and finds a peace that is bountiful in love and unity. Comparatively, although the women share a lot of cultural differences, all of them are haunted by trauma but are assertive in a manner that is influenced by context. Lastly, the paper takes into account the so-called Pages to Pixels dimension: these literary accounts are echoed in the digital activism of the present day and online communities of survivors. Real-life survivors such as the Indian acid-attack activist Laxmi Agarwal are following in the footsteps of Mariam and others by turning her personal wounds into activism, campaigning and social media activism to bring justice. The paper highlights the role of literature in providing an outlet to the voices of survivors and what this means to feminist criticism and storytelling in the digital age.

Keywords: Trauma, agency, feminist resilience, digital activism, intersectionality, accounts of survivors.

Introduction

The issue of violence against women has been a subject of long debate in literature whereby the narrative has been used to investigate the strength and suffering. Since the Victorian era up to our current times, female characters that go through rape, assault, or persecution usually come out as different and find a way of asserting their independence despite the systematic oppression. In this paper, we examine the case studies of the women Tess of the d'Urbervilles (Hardy), Beloved (Morrison), The Handmaid Tale (Atwood) and A Thousand Splendid Suns (Hosseini) as women who overcome gendered violence and ultimately gain power. In both novels, the main character experiences sexual or physical violence: Tess by her family member, Sethe by slavery, Offred by a totalitarian regime, Ceremony, Mariam by her husband: they become traumatized but convert it into agency.

Here, the idea is to demonstrate that these stories, in the feminist and trauma-theoretical approaches, represent resilience as a rebellion. Tess, Sethe, Offred, and Marias all articulate the traces of their history and so confront those who would silence them or victim-blame them. The paper sheds light on similarities (trauma, stigma, moral courage) and differences (cultural context, means of resistance) of women agency through the comparison of their destinies in different settings, namely: Victorian England, post-Civil War America, dystopian Gilead, and war-torn Afghanistan. The textual analysis preempts the evidence and academic materials to show how both heroines are able to uphold dignity, solidarity or self-determination despite the extreme limitations. The argument is that these characters portray a literary path of passive suffering to active survival, and so criticize the cruelty in society, and provide examples of empowerment. Getting to know their stories would contribute to the feminist literary scholarship and would be felt in our digital era as the survivor narratives are spreading across the internet (Pixels) as they spread across the page.

Literature Review / Context

Violence against women has also taken a different face in literature. The fall of the Victorian woman was frequently treated with moral disdain in Victorian novels and neither the 20th nor 21st-century author seems to contemplate injustice and perseverance. The Tess (1891) by Hardy was an outrage to the readers as it did not excuse Tess by simply punishing her because of raping her child; instead, it is the society that is hypocritical. One of the studies notes that Hardy uses his heroines as the focal points of his writing but ends up protecting Tess by espousing against the Victorian mores. In Beloved (1987), Morrison simply challenges the gendered violence of slavery. As scholars remark, Beloved serves to expose the invisible in the official histories and, accordingly, Morrison uses Beloved to construct a counter-archive of the experience of Black women. In a similar manner, the novel Handmaid the Tale (1985) by Atwood is a reply to the current fears and presents the female version of survival in the male-controlled world. This trend is followed by Hosseini in her A Thousand Splendid Suns (2007) that points to the persistence of Afghan women during war and patriarchy.

Victimhood vs. agency is an issue that critics of these works tend to emphasize. The feminist theory of literature has struggled between ideals of the angel in the house and the images of the fallen or suffering woman; Tess was both, which was a challenge to the Victorian standards. Morrison has received a Black feminist and trauma studies reading in which Sethe is supposed to represent the mental trauma of slavery. Atwood herself has stated her novel is science-fiction on the basis of actual history; the readers and critics interpret the story of Offred as a warning yet positive vision of rebellion. The novel by Hosseini is also based on the actual events, and how the unity of women and sacrifice can transform them into great ones.

A gap in scholarship exists between these 4 disparate stories that are being linked together in the theme of resilience. The critical approach that is currently being used is to consider each text separately (e.g. feminist reviews of Tess, trauma reviews of Beloved, dystopia reviews of Handmaid Tale, cultural reviews of Splendid Suns). The gap in this paper is addressed through the comparative analysis. It relies on trauma theory, intersectional analysis, and feminist theory to put forth the discourse. Intersectionality is also applicable due to the fact that Sethe, among others, has to struggle as a woman and slave, whereas Marias and Laila have to deal with ethnic warfare and social strata. The information provided by Kimberle Crenshaw on the subject of intersecting oppressions leaves us with the knowledge that gender, race, and class are all in the way to determine the vulnerability and the strategy of any character (Crenshaw 1989). In this way, our comparative spectacle throws light on the distribution of agency in women, both on an individual and a group level of action.

Theoretical Framework

This discussion uses feminist literary and trauma theory to understand the path undergone by the characters. Patriarchy is denunciatory of women, but subversion, and empowerment are mentioned in the feminist theory. According to one scholar, Toni Morrison paints the intersectional oppression of Black women, i.e., slavery deprived Black women of the ability to make decisions about their children and this is the key to understanding how women subjugated by men attempt to control their bodies. According to trauma theory (Caruth 1996) traumatic events are not comprehensible at the time and later in the story or symptoms, in the case of Morrison, the concept of rememory, the memories of Sethe haunt her until she can make sense of them. Embarking on the narration of the past (Sethe rediscovering the life of Sweet Home, Offred retelling the life she lived before Gilead), these stories create the therapeutic potentialities of bear witnessing. There is also the concept of agency as the freedom, which is morally defined (Murphy 2002) the ability to act in accordance with his or her values even in constraint. The fact that Tess will not accept the rude proposal of Angel (because of dignity) is a moral agency; the fact that Offred secretly expresses herself (by writing poems) psychologically. Intersectionality helps us to remember that gendered violence has no single pattern: Sethe cannot be raped and inflict her infanticide isolated of slavery racial hierarchy, and Mariam cannot be victimized without the influence of the Afghan patriarchal traditions. A feminist perspective is also concerned with the issues of power: the novels commentary on the ways husbands, masters, and regimes justify

violence. Overall, the gender/trauma models enable us to interpret the storylines of the main heroines as not as a mere victimization: they highlight the moment of change in each of the characters as survival experiences become resistance, memory experiences become power.

Character Case Studies

Tess of the d'Urbervilles (Tess Durbeyfield):

Tess is an innocent country girl exploited sexually by a man, Alec d'Urberville who seduces and subsequently rapes her. Hardy makes it quite clear that Alec predatory act is a crime of privilege and rank. It is not a moralistic story and Hardy does not accuse Tess of the act committed by Alec. Instead, he blames the Victorian society: Tess is a victim of the society, yet she manages to make herself stronger through the actions she made throughout the book. As an alternative to support, Tess is confronted with crude victim-blaming. Women such as Tess, as one of the critics points out, are always held responsible whenever they do anything wrong to their life despite being a victim. Her trauma is viewed by Hardy as a shame in her world. The stigma is demonstrated by schoolmaster calling her "Alleged. Even Tess regrets how good women are expected to be angels and her own community quickly identifies her as pure woman, god-damns it! (Hardy) yet the real devil is Alec. In a way, Tess is left in the state of victim since she is continuously caught between her pure childhood and nice womanhood as society attributes her misery to her fallen position in life.

This notwithstanding, Tess is morally courageous. She declines to get married to Angel Clare when he turns up abruptly to ask her to marry him after finding out of her past. During one of the scenes that are full of heartbreak, Tess informs Angel, O Mr. Clare -I cannot be your wife -I cannot!. This is where she pays tribute to her sense of integrity herself she will love Angel but cannot get married under the pretext of the lie. This truthfulness in tough situations reveals the agency of Tess: she decides what love should be like on her conditions even at her own cost. Hardy provides Tess with an instinctive self-respect and purity which spares her of being very bad. Tess withstands her miseries with grace even as tragedy creeps in. The power of Tess is in her fight against injustice to maintain her identity. She is left to bear the burden by herself after her assault, where she constantly forgives others but never herself. These are the words that she spoke, her famous words, to Angel at the end, I am at peace now, which are the results of a self-knowledge that she had to achieve through hard effort. Hardy thereby plays around with the fallen woman stereotype: Tess is in fact a heart a proud, albeit doomed, heroine. To the very end she opposes fatalism, to become one of the victims but in the position of her own choice. The sad demise of Tess in Hardy moral universe is like a silent commentary about a hypocritical society and a tribute to her strength.

Sethe (Beloved)

Sethe is a formerly-slaved woman in a 1850s Kentucky. She is physically and sexually abused regularly as property in Sweet Home plantation; her husband is kidnapped, her mother is murdered. Morrison does not explicitly illustrate rape, however, slave songs and memories witness that white men regularly used enslaved women. The worst trauma is

experienced when Sethe decides to kill her newborn daughter instead of letting her be a slave. This infanticide haunts her with the dead child that she prophesies about (Beloved).

Sethe finds the impact of violence of slavery pervading her psyche. She is a ghost and memory of her past that haunts her. Morrison employs the theme of rememory to dramatize the way trauma comes back. One of the studies observes that race and gender in *Beloved* intersect: the slavery deprived black women of the right to choose who they should give birth to. Sethe represents this: the deprivation of the power of her body and her family is intolerable. Her maternal affection is power and pain. As a critic notes, *Beloved* narrates about Sethe who is haunted with the sacrifices she had to make in the name of keeping her children out of slavery atrocities. The tragic statement that Sethe makes to her agency in that sacrifice (killing her child) is a radical choice, a decision that is motivated by love and resistance.

Sethe manages to survive both physically as she runs to her freedom and psychologically as she addresses memory. According to the story presented by Morrison, the final resistance of Sethe is the ability to remember and speak: she is not ready to be quiet. The novel in itself is a sort of counter-archive that speaks her story out. In this regard, her survival in itself is rebellious: by surviving, narrating her own story (to Denver and Paul D.) and cleansing herself off of *Beloved*, Sethe marks her own territory in the past. Morrison shows the motherhood of Sethe not as a docile submission but as a resistance and a battle.

The agency of Sethe is ironic: it is expressed in her unwavering love and denial of slavery to destroy her spirit. When Paul D. questions Sethe on how she can do the unthinkable, she responds that Me and you got more yesterday than anybody. We must have some future of some sort (Morrison). Her moves are the result of a fierce autonomy, over even death itself, though she feels deeply guilty of this. Ultimately, the tale of Sethe is reclaiming the identity through the recollection. The trauma of slavery and the need to take care of *Beloved* is the survival of slavery as suggested by Morrison as a way of fighting a world that failed to recognize her as a human being.

Offred (The Handmaid's Tale)

Offred (which is her real name June) is a woman in Gilead, a theocratic government where the body of women is owned by the state. She gets into a sexual servitude legally as a Handmaid, a decision to have sex with her commander in the name of having a child. This is normalized institutionalized rape in Gilead. The clothes that Offred wears (red robes) signify that she belongs to a man; her every action is monitored. The narration of Offred is presented as a subversion of memoir, her own memoir. There are subtle means of her resistance though externally she is obedient. Hansot remarks that Offred has intentions of being a survivor. She gets to know how to read lips, how to read between the lines, and how to treasure forbidden memories. Offred develops underground communities: she gets an escape story with Moira in June Centers (another escape), she gives back some of her choice by stealing butter as a skin care item, and she gets in illegal affairs (with Nick). Significantly, she does not forget her own name and her history - a silent rebellion in the society that deprives women of identity.

Hansot believes that the inner world of Offred is, in her turn, a form of resistance: The selves that Offred painstakingly builds is a possible resistance of the hidden resistance. Offred forces Gilead to remain silent by telling her own story. She keeps saying to herself *Nolite te bastarδες carborundorūm* (a secret motto), which means in crude Latin “Don’t grind me under foot, you bastards. This line turns out to be her resistance mantra. By recalling her passed husband Luke and daughter, Offred preserves her own history despite Gilead erasing it. Offred’s agency is subtle. Since she has no strength to openly rebel (as her best friend Moira does by eloping), she has psychological and ethical independence. Her decisions are risky: She agrees to the advances of the Commander to find out what was going on, or then again, her life is at risk in Mayday resistance. These instances demonstrate that despite the systems of oppression, little decisions save selfhood. The fact that Offred survives, as it might seem, passively, is, as one analysis points out, a declaration of freedom: her refusal to go all the way, her emotional consciousness, and her clandestine narratives guarantee that she can guarantee her own survival and that she can get stronger as a person. To conclude, Offred exercises the power of agency as memory and love, not losing hope in the presence of institutionalized violence.

Mariam (A Thousand Splendid Suns)

Mariam is a child bride in Afghanistan who is an illegitimate daughter who endures years of domestic violence. Her second husband Rasheed is savagely beating her because of perceived grievances. The basic laws that govern Afghanistan do not provide her with a legal option; even going out alone attracts male criticism. Mariam was initially lonely, but later on she is given a role to play in her connection with Laila, the second wife of Rasheed. The abuse unites them in friendship. Mariam is constantly reminded of words by her mother Nana: Women like us, she endures. The theme of endurance is there: Mariam silently accepts beatings and humiliation but directs it on behalf of Laila and Aziza (Laila daughter). Their relationship is a place of resistance to a sadistic man and society. The impression of Laila is gradually changing on Mariam; to the extent that Mariam takes the infant Aziza and raises her as her own child, murmuring to the infant, Huh? I am nobody... What do I have to give you? but she demonstrates that she has given Aziza a future. The act of Mariam as an agency ends in a heroic gesture: as Rasheed tries to murder Laila with one last beating, Mariam comes in and shoots him. This is self-conscious, self-sacrificing decision. As it is mentioned by LitCharts, Mariam decides to kill Rasheed in order to provide Laila with the opportunity to have a better life, understanding all of that she would be found guilty and executed by the Taliban due to her act. Mariam therefore wilfully undertakes to defend one another assuming responsibility.

It is sacrifice that gives Mariam dignity. Just prior to her death, she recalls, there had also been a few beautiful moments in [her life], but as she shut her eyes down it was not regret but a feeling of immense peace which overwhelmed her. She believes: she was born a Weed, a bastard, which nobody wanted, but was able to die a woman who had loved and was loved in return. Mariam is given a new narrative of triumph where the tragic end becomes her victory: by standing together and the power of motherly love, she has managed to make

her humanity count against her oppressors. The fact that she is acting on her moral compass, which is to save Laila and dispense justice, is her agency against the aggression.

Comparative Analysis

1. **Similarities:** All the four heroines endured serious traumas (rape, beating, coerced sex, slavery) and had to face victim-blaming or lack of legal authority. Both of them are resilient within or in relationships. Offred, Tess and Sethe as well as Mariam have a fundamental moral standing irrespective of abuse. They care about loved ones: Tess defends the honor of Angel; Sethe dies in order to save her children; Offred does not forget about her family; Mariam rescues Laila and children. Symbolically, all the stories emphasize the idea that the loyalty and compassion of women can be the force that can be harnessed in the patriarchal society.
2. **Differences:** The situations are very diverse. The Victorian England Tess lives in has very rigid sexual mores; she has agency that is moral and lonely. The America Sethe is in is defined by race and slavery; her agency is psychological (remembering) and extreme (infanticide). The Gilead of Offred is the Gilead of the contemporary totalitarianism; her agency is secret and intellectual. The Afghanistan that Mariam inhabits is war-torn and conservative; her agency is finally communal (defending another). These cultural prisms influence the appearance of the agency: Tess dies a tragic death, the death of Offred is unclear, Sethe is tormented but optimistic, and Mariam dies patiently.
3. **Empowerment Patterns:** We are familiar with similar arcs: each of the characters is a wounded or submissive victim, but then discovers some kind of resistance. Resistance in Tess is a dignified passivity (of refusal of lies). It is the re-possession of memory and the maternity rebellion in Sethe. The case of Offred is survival by inner revolt. The sacrifice of Mariam is transfigurative. The agency is being expressed through moral courage (Tess), community (Mariam, Sethe), and intellectual subversion (Offred). It is worth noting that they all derive strength in their very weakness: the more they are oppressed, the bigger their self-assertion.

Pages and Pixels Angle

These literary stories sound familiar to the modern activism and virtual texts on the Pages to Pixels spectrum. Similarly to Tess, Sethe, Offred, and Mariam, who rely on voice and choice to resist their oppressors, the real-life survivors rely on the digital media to be empowered. Indicatively, Laxmi Agarwal, an Indian acid-attack survivor, used her agony to launch her activism through social movements. Having been viciously attacked, she became a member of the online campaign (Stop Acid Sale) in order to create awareness of acid violence and stigma. The policy change and mass solidarity were the results of her digital advocacy (petition, social media). The process of Laxmi, who submits litigations in the name of the general interest and creates support networks, compares to the lives of the novels: the subject becomes the object. She is a human-rights activist, who has become an icon of hope and empowerment, which is gritty just like Mariams and others.

On the same note, *The Handmaid's Tale* has become an inspiration of actual protests (e.g. activists dressed as handmaids) and online posts of solidarity (e.g. #HandmaidsOnTour, #Resist), which indicates how the themes of *Offred* are so pervasive in digital culture. Survivor testimonials (blogs, vlogs) are based on the model of rememory used by Sethe, narrated stories that were suppressed. The pages are magnified in any case by the pixels: the representations of women in literature who come out of violence become a source of the support networks and the awareness campaigns on the internet. These new age digital narrators carry the current of the literary survivors by transforming personal damages into group strength.

Conclusion

Sethe, Tess Durbeyfield, and *Offred*, and Mariam, each is a strong example of how trauma can be turned into agency. These women do not want to be victims, and through personal values, fidelity to the truth, motherhood, self-preservation, and love, they do not want to be seen as victims. The dignity of Tess, loving rebellion of Sethe, subversive survival of *Offred*, and brave sacrifice of Mariam all prove that pain does not necessarily have to be taken silently. Feminist theme of the novels is obvious: the violence of patriarchy can be opposed with moral bravery and unity.

These stories carry on a tradition of complicated female characters who undermine victimization, in a literary sense. Socially, they provide comfort and plan to the readers and activists. In the globalized world, this image of the survivor that is strong and resilient jumps off the page to pixels. Modern women like Laxmi Agarwal who go online to fight against violence are demonstrating the same determination Hardy, Morrison, Atwood, and Hosseini envisioned.

Finally, portraying both sexual and physical assault and female empowerment, these works challenge the reader to start thinking about injustice and to hear the voice of the survivors. They stimulate further scholarship to seek more fictional and real histories of women who emerge. By doing so, they emphasize that there is an intersection between literature and life: trauma does not have to be silent, but rather can give strength to existence.

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