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EXPLORING THE SOCIO - CULTURAL ELEMENTS IN TONI MORRISON'S *TAR BABY* AND  
GITHA HARIHARAN'S *IN TIMES OF SIEGE* THROUGH THE POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Globalization and Postcoloniality are the two most important terms in social and cultural theory today. Globalization refers to the emergence of a world economy characterized by the recent phenomenon of mass migration, rapid telecommunication and the rapid flow of both capital and economic goods across national boundaries; while post colonialism refers with the effect of colonisation on cultures and societies. This paper critically explores the social and cultural elements in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* and Githa Hariharan's *In Times of Siege* in a post colonial perspective and shows the manner in which the accepted notion of identity, nation and culture are challenged.

The conflict between the past and the future, between ethnicity and progress, is one of Morrison's techniques. Son, the hero of *Tar Baby* cannot break free from the briar patch, his cultural roots and adopts an uncompromising stand, chooses loneliness and defeat rather than spiritual and psychic death. The river in *Tar Baby* is a repository of the psychosis of colonial and imperialist history. Poor insulted, brokenhearted river. Poor demented stream. Now it sat in one place like a grandmother and became a swamp the Haitians called Sein de Vieilles. And witch's tit it was: a shriveled fogbound oval seeping with a thick black substance that even mosquitoes could not live near. In a similar manner, *In Times of Siege* contributes to the nationalism and communalism in India. The nationalist glorifies history during colonial times is not questioned in post colonial times too. Both writers deal with a colonial past, a nationalism present and secure a future in the era of Globalization.

Key words: Post colonialism, nsation, mimicry, identity.

Postcolonialism and Globalisation are two terms to pin down in every field of study whether it's economic, cultural, social or literary. Globalisation deals with the rethinking of the traditional nation-centered focus of literary studies, whereas, Postcolonialism, with its key concepts of 'trans-national' and 'cross-cultural' challenges the idea that one nation is at the centre and the other at the periphery. This paper critically explores the social and cultural elements in Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* and Githa Hariharan's *In Times of Siege* in a post colonial perspective and shows the manner in which the accepted notions of identity, nation and culture are challenged. In the postcolonial period, nations set up their own identity but the ruling classes occupy the position of the colonizers and the minority becomes the colonised.

Homi Bhabha's concept of 'mimicry' speaks of 'recognition', 'identification' and describes the ways in which colonised peoples resist the power of the colonisers. This cultural difference and complexity interconnected networks of globalisation reveals the present situation of the world. Homi Bhabha in his essay *DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation*:

The scraps, patches, and rags of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the science of a national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance interpellates a growing circle of national subjects. In the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative. It is through this process of splitting that the conceptual ambivalence of modern society becomes the site of writing the nation (*Nation and Narration* 297).

Generally a 'nation' means a body of people who share a real or imagined common history, language, culture or origin. They are important in the discussion of colonialism, specifically in the focus of nationalism and post colonial discussion. All nations have their own novelists, helps to make them more inclusive and realistic. The primary attempt to think about 'nations' starts with Benedict Anderson's book, *Imagined Communities*. Imagined things are not imaginary or unreal, but imagined communities are real and unreal, ghostly or virtual. Nations are therefore defined by how the communities are imagined. Ernest Renan in the essay, 'What is a nation?' suggests:

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form (*Nation and Narration* 19).

Morrison's novels question where a characters original 'home' is, what ancestral 'roots' are and how such an 'origin' shapes identity. For her, 'home' becomes a metaphor for self-identity, self- fulfillment and self-direction rather than functioning as a purely idealized locus in the past. The African- American experience for her includes the legacy of exile from West Africa. She presents the predicament that home both is and not is America; it is and is not Africa. Ancestry is both a myth about and determinant of the self. In this way Morrison shares the concerns of writers like Salman Rushdie, who also views home as both fictive and determinative. For Morrison and Hariharan exiles and emigrants are haunted by their past; they want to look back to find "where they came from" and how it bears on who they are. Rushdie says:

if we look back, we must also do so in the knowledge- which gives the rise to profound uncertainties- that our physical alienation from almost inevitability means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the place that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands...of the minds (Rushdie 10).

In *Tar Baby*, the character Jadine Childs, a fashion model, unconsciously understands that the cost of modeling means undermining her racial identity and sensitivity, illustrates Morrison's criticism of investing an identity entirely in a culture. Through *Son*, Morrison identifies the past, with one's ancestral "roots", is also a kind of death because it means one has no future but only the past as the locus for identity. The novel illustrates that both character feel unfulfilled and their desire to go home. The conflict between both the characters led's tension between different conceptions of their identity. Home is linked to self- identity and if the notion of home limited to its perception as necessary to sustain that sense of self then we are not seeing through a perceptive that includes those for whom home is a construction.

*Tar Baby* suggests that one way people feel at home is to feel that they are unified with themselves by the various determinants of their identity and that those determinants work in accord with a collective sense of themselves as part of their large community. The novel centers on six characters who live or work on an estate L'Arbe de la Croix on 'Isle des Chevaliers'. The owners of the estate Valerian and Margaret Street are wealthy White Americans who are living there in exile. By her contrast to her husband Valerian, Margaret is exiled on the island against her will. Valerian the exile is an escape from the United States, where class distinctions, in the 1980's when the novel takes place are increasingly erased. Even though Margaret can enjoy a leisurely life style on the estate, in which she does not share ownership with Valerian, she still despises both the estate and the island. Morrison characterises Margaret as both an example of the epidemic of

homelessness on the island and an example of a cultural invalid. She is so home sick and has so little sense of where or who she wants to be that she breaks down and abuses her baby sons.

At the market, Jadine is struck by a woman she comes across in the diary section:

The vision itself was a woman much too tall. Under her long canary yellow dress Jadine knew there was too much hip, too must bust. The agency would laugh her out of the lobby, so why was she and everybody else in the store transfixed? The height? The skin like tar against the canary yellow dress? The women walked down the aisle as though her many-colored sandals were pressing gold tracks on the floor. Two upside-down V's were scored into each of her cheeks; her hair was wrapped in a gelee as yellow as her dress. The people in the aisles watched her without embarrassment, with full glances instead of sly ones. She had no arm basket or cart. Just her many- colored sandals and her yellow robe. Jadine turned her cart around and went back down the aisle telling herself she wanted to reexamine the vegetables. The women leaned into the diary section and opened a carton from which she selected three eggs (45).

The colour yellow, symbolizes Jadine's struggle with assimilation. Whenever Jadine recalls this occurrences she thinks of the woman as "the woman in the canary yellow dress" (45). That the women's dress is yellow, her sandals track gold. This all reveals Jadine's fear of assimilation. Jadine's character presenting the identity conflict that she feels herself agitated by the presence of a kind of nationalist Other represented first by Jadine and later by Son.

*Tar Baby* clearly depicts Jadine as the primordial Other who resists the materialist and consumerist modes that have become her very livelihood. For example, Jadine overtly points out that the women's physical characteristics do not fulfill the institutionalised standards of beauty set by the European modeling agency with whom Jadine has signed. That the women's skin is 'like tar' emphasis her blackness an emphasis that Jadine is undecided about for herself. Morrison primarily focused on how black people have been spiritually and physically victimised throughout the oppressive black history in the United States. Morrison locates postcolonial black identity in the socio political grounds where cultures are hybridised power are negotiated and individuals are reproduced as resistive agents.

Apart from sharing the common theme of exploring female subjectivity in order to establish an identity in the patriarchal society Githa Hariharan also creates a separate identity for herself by attempting to write about non feminist subjects like the question of writers freedom and the true meaning of education and teaching in the Indian milieu. The central theme of all her novels is the re-writing of given narratives be its myths, history or fables which is essentially a postmodern technique called 'revisionism'. *In Times of Siege* contributes to the debate on nationalism and communalism movement in India. The novel shows that the myth of the nation is exclusive as well as inclusive. The novel moves in two tier- one the left of two individuals in a secured, secluded Delhi and two, life of a professor at his work place and the happenings relates to the official life. Hariharan shows how the medieval history course lessons are distorted because the writer has:

I have not made the heroes heroic enough, and that I have made the villains too villainous. At any rate, they claim the lesson *distorts* history. It seems I have not sung enough of paean to the glory of Hindu Kingdoms; and that I make too much of caste divisions among Hindus (55).

A history which during colonial times was glorified by the nationalists cannot be questioned in post colonial times. The national identity is defined in contrast to colonial history and 'Others' in a nation, the minorities. A rich history is homogenised into a 'golden Hindu history' (93) legitimising the programme of one language, one religion and one nation. Hariharan interweaves the individual and collective aspects of the society. This is perhaps present in the description of when Shiv finally promises himself to take a stance against the Hindu right, a recognition of his own agency. Shiv then thinks of his place in society as encompassing a "bit of land they own together" (179). Rather than being a physical place, this metaphorical bit of land is a private conceptualization of locality and culture. While the past reminds important, this stance indicates that Shiv is now an agent in his own life.

Shiv's daughter, Thara epitomizes the post-colonial concept of diasporic subject imagining a golden native past. Tagged on the end of her emails is "Do you Yahoo?"(112). Her question reflects her communal sense of locality. The ideology of nationalism became a source for inspiration for the independence

movements, post-independence has become a restrictive notion in post colonial nations like India where voices are muted. In the novel Hariharan primarily focuses on the historiography of two historical upheavals- the flourishing and subsequent destruction of twelfth century Kalyana, Basava's city and the freedom movement and partition of India in 1947 and then relates to how Shiv engages in the production of locality in the present.

Morrison and Hariharan talks of national identity and feelings without any racial, communal or caste distinction. In a post colonial nation instead of seeing colonialism as something locked in the past, Bhabha shows how its histories and cultures constantly intrude on the present demanding that we transform our understanding of cross-cultural relations. In his comments on Frantz Fanon's "Black Skin, White Masks, Homi Bhabha announces that memory is the necessary and sometimes hazardous bridge between colonialism and the question of cultural identity. Remembering he writes is never a quite act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful remembering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present" (Bhabha 1994, 63). Both the writers show that what we needed is not only multi culturalism but also universalism. They protest against homogenising discourse of nationalism and shows that one needs to think about it in the new political context.

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