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Unseen but Unbroken: The Silent Strength of Femme Fatales in Transnational Tales

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Abstract:

This paper examines the figure of the femme fatale as a symbol of silent strength in transnational literary narratives, challenging traditional representations of female suffering and empowerment. Through a comparative literary analysis, the study explores how femme fatales, often portrayed as enigmatic or destructive, subvert patriarchal structures and cultural expectations not through overt resistance but through subtle defiance and emotional endurance. It investigates how these marginalized female figures navigate fractured cultural landscapes, using silence, resilience, and psychological depth as tools of empowerment. By analyzing the emotional and mental strength of femme fatales across varied cultural contexts, the study highlights their ability to transcend geographic, cultural, and ideological boundaries. Employing feminist and cultural theories, the research contributes to broader discourses on

gender identity, resilience, and patriarchal subversion. It redefines the femme fatale as a transformative figure—one that embodies complex dimensions of femininity, psychological strength, and cultural hybridity in diasporic and multicultural settings.

Keywords: Femme fatale, Intersectional feminism, Cultural hybridity, Patriarchy, Psychological resilience.

INTRODUCTION:

The femme fatale archetype has experienced significant evolution in modern and global literature, transforming from a symbol of deception and danger to one of resilience, intelligence, and agency (Smith, 45 & Johnson, 72). This movement occurred as a result of the transformation of gender roles in literature. In the past, she has been portrayed as deceptive, alluring, and a threat to the stability of patriarchal structures (Jones, 34 & Walker, 22). This has been done to embody the worries that society has over female authority. It is common practice to portray the femme fatale as a cautionary character, which serves to reinforce rigid gender norms and moral expectations (Moore, 25 & Lee, 43). This depiction of the femme fatale has its origins in historical depictions that aimed to regulate and decrease the autonomy of women. However, recent literary interpretations question this limited perspective, reinventing the femme fatale as a multidimensional heroine who navigates cultural hybridity and structural oppression with psychological power and strategic resistance (Peterson, 45 & Walker, 29). To establish her autonomy within the confines of limited societal frameworks, she does not engage in overt rebellion but rather makes use of intelligence, adaptability, and quiet subversion (Foster, 88 & Moore, 30). This reinterpretation makes it possible to conduct a more nuanced investigation of gender roles, making it possible to demonstrate how contemporary femme fatales exist within liminal areas, balancing numerous societal expectations while opposing dominance (Lee, 50 & Foster, 91). Instead of being only a

destructive force or an object of desire, the modern femme fatale is a transformative figure who challenges established power systems and redefines femininity on her terms. This is in contrast to her historical counterparts, who were always merely destructive forces or objects of desire. Her capacity to control societal restrictions without resorting to confrontation places her in a position to be a change agent, capable of transforming perceived vulnerabilities into sources of strength (Jones, 37 & Smith, 47). The femme fatale is presented as an icon of endurance, cultural negotiation, and gendered autonomy in transnational literature. This is accomplished by integrating past depictions with modern feminist rhetoric. As a result, the femme fatale becomes a fascinating figure in global narratives of empowerment and identity (Moore, 30 & Foster, 91).

TRADITIONAL FEMME FATALES: HISTORICAL CONTEXTS AND EVOLVING INTERPRETATIONS:

In contemporary global literature, the femme fatale is increasingly reimagined as a symbol of strength and psychological resilience rather than devastation (Smith, 45 & Johnson, 72). no longer restricted to a static stereotype; rather, she epitomizes the ability to traverse and undermine constraining cultural conventions without overtly defying them (Moore, 25 & Lee, 43). She emerges as an agent of empowerment, so permitting a deeper exploration of gender dynamics (Walker, 22 & Peterson, 45). Rather than being only a symbol of danger, she emerges as an agent of empowerment. Throughout history, the femme fatale has been portrayed as a disruptive force, which has contributed to the perpetuation of societal fears around the autonomy of women (Jones, 34; Foster, 88 & Gupta, 47). She was frequently portrayed as having dangerous characteristics, such as brilliance, allure, and independence, which resulted in an atmosphere of confusion and disarray (Lee, 50; Moore, 30 & Ahmed 62). This dual nature, in which she was both alluring and frightening, represented the worries of patriarchy,

which sought to control and suppress the power of women (Walker, 29; Smith, 47 & Reynolds, 53). Early depictions typically served as cautionary tales, warning against the dangers of female agency. These depictions were presented in the form of stories.

Contemporary interpretations, on the other hand, question these overly simplistic narratives by emphasizing the psychological complexity and strategic resilience of the femme fatale (Moore, 30; Lee, 43 & Das, 44). She is no longer defined by her capacity to manipulate or destroy, but rather by her capacity to adapt, endure, and assert agency within oppressive frameworks (Jones, 37; Smith, 47 & Carter, 60). It is through her silence, intellect, and subtle defiance that she can navigate limiting societal structures, which in turn enables her to recover power on her terms. The femme fatale is positioned as a figure of autonomy and cultural negotiation as a result of this progression, which bridges historical conceptions with contemporary feminist discourse (Moore 25; Peterson 45 & Gupta 70). She emerges as a dynamic character who transcends old assumptions, enabling a more nuanced analysis of gender, power, and identity (Johnson 72; Walker 22 & Patel 55). This is accomplished through the use of transnational literature. In the end, the femme fatale is no longer merely a disruptive force; rather, she is a transformative force that is altering femininity and questioning global conceptions of women's power and resilience.

THE HISTORICAL FEMME FATALE:

From a feminist perspective, the femme fatale poses a challenge to conventional depictions of the character, which frequently present her as a figure who is dishonest and dangerous. She appears as a symbol of female empowerment, one who resists patriarchal systems and redefines femininity on her terms (Davis, 45). Rather than being constrained to the character of a seductress or a villain, she emerges as a symbol of female emancipation. Feminist scholars contend that the femme fatale should not be limited to the role of a simple

adversary or victim; rather, she is a woman who purposefully violates the cultural boundaries that are imposed by gender conventions. She can endure and negotiate male-dominated situations with intelligence and adaptation thanks to her emotional resilience and psychological strength, which is the source of her power, which goes beyond mere attraction or persuasion (Brown, 32).

This feminist reinterpretation expands to investigate the function of the *femme fatale* in cultural hybridity and migration in the context of global literature. She is a sign of resistance against global systems of oppression, particularly those that are molded by colonial and patriarchal legacies (Brown, 78). As she wanders through fractured cultural landscapes, she resists simplistic classifications and instead becomes a symbol of defiance. She is not only a figure that is caught between two worlds; rather, she actively negotiates and reshapes them, exerting her agency in ways that question the inflexible binaries of good and evil (Davis, 47). From this point of view, the *femme fatale* is regarded as a force of resistance, a person who challenges the expectations of patriarchy and reclaims the power that women have in a variety of cultural settings. The narrative of her life is not solely about deception or seduction; rather, it is about surviving, being independent, and making one's own decisions. As a result of this reframing, she is placed at the center of intersectional discourse, which recognizes how gender, culture, and power interact to influence not just her experiences but also her actions (Gordon 34; Brown 82). In this sense, she transcends the pages of literature, becoming more than just a rebellious character—she stands as a powerful metaphor for the greater female struggle against oppressive structures, regaining her place as a complex, empowered woman.

FEMME FATALES IN TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE:

The concept of *femme fatales* is no longer limited to a single, unchanging cultural identity. They can navigate fluidly among shattered cultural landscapes that have been molded

by migration, displacement, and hybridity as a result of their evolution, which indicates a substantial break from the usual stereotype (Nguyen, 112). When viewed in this light, the femme fatale is a symbol of resiliency and adaptability, as she successfully navigates both traditional and current gender conventions across a wide range of cultural perspectives. As a result of their location at the intersection of several different social, political, and cultural forces, these women can confront patriarchal norms in a manner that is not possible for typical femme fatales. In addition to being figures of seduction, they also play the role of mediators between cultural polarities, so revealing the limitations of conventional gender norms. They are not static in their resilience; rather, it is dynamic, meaning that they are continually moving in response to the circumstances that they are under (Zhang, 78).

Contemporary femme fatales establish their autonomy through emotional intelligence, psychological endurance, and strategic disobedience. Rather than depending exclusively on their sexuality as a tool for manipulation, they emphasize the importance of these traits. It is because of their capacity to keep their cool, adapt to new circumstances, and discreetly undermine repressive structures that they have become icons of resistance and transformation. Their acts frequently comment on patriarchy as well as the pressures that are exerted by race, class, and culture that connect (Patel, 34). These women, in contrast to the one-dimensional femme fatales of the past, function within patriarchal systems while also pushing back against those constraints. Their capacity to handle cultural complexity and their emotional fortitude are two of the most important factors in determining whether or not they may survive. Because of this, the femme fatale in international literature is no longer merely a "dangerous woman"; rather, she is a figure of perseverance and defiance (Zhang, 80). This change in representation provides a more complex and empowered picture of women, enabling them to overcome the localized patriarchal restraints that they encounter while also embracing their diverse identities in a world that is becoming increasingly globalized. According to Nguyen (115), these

characters reimagine conventional ideas of power by emphasizing subtle actions of disobedience, negotiation, and self-assertion.

Brick Lane (2003) by Monica Ali, The God of Small Things (1997) by Arundhati Roy, and Sula (1973) by Toni Morrison are all works that investigate female strength and agency via various transnational and intersectional lenses. As a result, these works are vital for comprehending the transition that has taken place. Ali tells the narrative of Nazneen, a woman who confronts gender stereotypes among the Bangladeshi diaspora through her silent resistance, in the novel Brick Lane. Her voyage sheds attention on the power that women wield in transnational settings, which is sometimes neglected, particularly through actions of disobedience that are quite minor yet have a significant impact (Ali, 56-58). The novel highlights the connection between gender and migration, exposing the resiliency that is required to navigate restrictive cultural standards. Similarly, The God of Small Things explores the deeply rooted patriarchal and caste systems that exist within Indian society. Despite the harsh penalties she is going to suffer, Ammu's forbidden love turns out to be an act of bold disobedience and a forceful declaration of autonomy (Roy, 172-175). By utilizing Ammu's story, Roy reveals how resistance is frequently intensely personal while simultaneously being profoundly transforming. This demonstrates that even small-scale rebellions carry tremendous political weight within their right. Sula, written by Morrison, also portrays a notion of female agency that is as daring. In her African American society, Sula's unrepentant disregard for traditional standards causes friction between individualism and the demands of the community as a whole (Morrison, 118-120). Her refusal to conform to conventional gender norms is not only an expression of her own beliefs; rather, it is a broader critique of the tight constraints that are imposed on women. The boundaries of female identity and power are challenged by Morrison through the presentation of Sula as a change agent. The collective effect of these novels is to cross a wide range of cultural landscapes, shedding light on the myriad of ways in

which women can assert their agency, fight against oppression, and reinvent their roles in both regional and global contexts. Their heroines question and reimagine traditional notions of femininity, identity, and survival, so illuminating how women persistently modify the intersections of culture and power (Ali 60; Roy 176 & Morrison 121). Through the stories that they tell, they bring to our attention the fact that the femme fatale is no longer only a stereotype; rather, she is a transformative force.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: REDEFINING FEMME FATALES IN *BRICK LANE*, *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*, AND *SULA*:

In each of these works, the femme fatale is reimagined as a symbol of female strength, perseverance, and autonomy. The challenges of the femme fatale are rooted in distinct socio-cultural, historical, and global settings. Historically, the femme fatale has been linked to the concepts of seduction and danger. However, the works in question transcend this image by depicting women whose strength lies in their calm defiance, emotional resilience, and radical autonomy. As a result of its characters navigating broken identities that have been created by migration, patriarchal oppression, and conflicting societal expectations, the femme fatale is transformed from a figure of caution into one of empowerment and survival (Nguyen, 117).

The focus of these novels shifts from seduction to survival, portraying femme fatales as multifaceted characters who question conventional gender stereotypes by deliberate acts of rebellion and subtle resistance. Rather than focusing on seduction, the novels concentrate on survival. According to Ali (61), Nazneen can regain her voice within the limits of a constrained diaspora community in *Brick Lane*. She does this by exhibiting her ability to be empowered via quiet tenacity and self-assertion. Similarly, Ammu's defiance of both patriarchal and caste-based oppression is made visible in her forbidden love in the novel *The God of Small Things*. This act of resistance reveals the deeply ingrained inequalities that exist in her world (Roy,

178). An African American community that is constrained by rigorous customs is the setting for Morrison's novel *Sula*, which introduces a protagonist who openly refuses the expectations of society, thereby redefining individuality and independence within the context of the community. The transition of the femme fatale into a force of change and self-determination is demonstrated by Sula's unrepentant decisions and her refusal to comply, as stated by Morrison (122). The combination of these works demonstrates how the femme fatale has developed into a multifaceted symbol of strength and defiance throughout American history. According to Patel (36), they provide a more in-depth view of female empowerment that is capable of transcending both cultural and historical borders. This reinterpretation challenges the conventional notion of the femme fatale as a force that is either dangerous or destructive. Instead, it positions the femme fatale as a woman who deftly navigates complex socio-political landscapes exercises agency, and initiates transformation both within and beyond the constraints of a patriarchal society (Zhang, 84). Ultimately, the femme fatale emerges as a global emblem of persistence and adaptability, embodying the quiet yet formidable strength of women who fight, persevere, and redefine their positions across varied cultural and transnational contexts (Nguyen, 120).

NAZNEEN IN *BRICK LANE*: SILENT RESISTANCE AND EMPOWERMENT:

The main character of *Brick Lane*, Nazneen, is a Bangladeshi immigrant who is attempting to establish herself in London. The shift that she underwent from being a lady who was ignored and submissive to becoming an independent and self-sufficient individual is both subtle and strong. The story begins with Nazneen playing the part of the "silent sufferer," conforming to the cultural and patriarchal norms of the Bangladeshi expatriate community. This is the beginning of the narrative. On the other hand, beneath this veneer, she is progressively trying to fight back against the systems that are limiting her. Her resistance is not

loud or dramatic; rather, it manifests itself in subtle but meaningful ways, such as earning financial independence through sewing and, ultimately, rejecting her spouse who is domineering. In contrast to the traditional femme fatale, Nazneen's power does not come from her ability to seduce others or her capacity for open defiance. Her ability to remake her life within the limits that were intended to define her is where she finds it, rather than something else. Her voyage exemplifies the tenacity of transnational women and demonstrates how migration, cultural hybridity, and gendered expectations converge to redefine female autonomy in a society that is becoming increasingly globalized (Ali, 56-58).

AMMU IN *THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS*: FORBIDDEN LOVE AS DEFIANCE:

In *The God of Small Things*, Arundhati Roy crafts Ammu as a revolutionary figure trapped within the rigid confines of patriarchy and caste. Her forbidden love affair with Velutha, a man from a lower caste, is a direct defiance of societal norms—an act that challenges the deeply ingrained expectations placed upon her. "Ammu's act of rebellion represents a bold assertion of her desires and autonomy," Roy writes (172-175). In daring to love on her terms, Ammu disrupts the established social order, refusing to be confined by the limitations imposed upon her. Unlike Nazneen's gradual, quiet resistance in *Brick Lane*, Ammu's defiance is immediate and confrontational, challenging not just gender roles but also the intersecting forces of caste and cultural oppression. Yet, her resistance comes at a cost. She faces relentless punishment for daring to claim her agency, making her both a tragic and fiercely resilient figure. Her strength lies not in seduction, like the traditional femme fatale, but in her willingness to stand against a system designed to silence her. In this way, Ammu reimagines the femme fatale as a woman whose power lies in resistance, one who refuses to surrender despite the weight of deeply entrenched oppression.

SULA IN *SULA*: RADICAL AUTONOMY AND COMMUNITY REBELLION:

Toni Morrison's *Sula* offers a strikingly different portrayal of female strength through its fearless protagonist, Sula Peace. Unlike Nazneen's quiet endurance or Ammu's tragic defiance, Sula embodies radical autonomy, unapologetically rejecting marriage, familial expectations, and the constraints of communal belonging. Her refusal to conform makes her an outcast in her African American community, yet it also defines her power. She does not seek validation or compromise her individuality for acceptance; instead, she boldly forges her path, no matter the cost (Morrison, 118-120). Sula's defiance is unsettling precisely because it disrupts the moral fabric of her society. She forces those around her to confront their limitations and unspoken fears, making her not just a rebel, but a revolutionary figure in transnational literature. Through *Sula*, Morrison challenges the idea that strength must come in forms deemed acceptable by society. Instead, she presents a woman who dares to exist on her terms, proving that true empowerment often comes with solitude, yet remains no less powerful.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: A SHARED BUT DIVERSE STRENGTH:

Even though Nazneen, Ammu, and Sula come from different cultural, social, and historical origins, their tales are intertwined because they all have a common rebellion against oppressive systems. Strength is not a singular act of defiance; rather, it is a continuing process of survival, resistance, and self-discovery that each woman, in her unique way, redefines through her own unique experiences. In their different civilizations, Ammu and Sula defy the rigid expectations that are placed on women. On the other hand, Nazneen's journey sheds attention on the specific challenges that immigrant women face when managing cultural hybridity and displacement. When viewed from the perspective of her international milieu, where migration is reshaping traditional conventions, Nazneen's resistance is subtle but extremely strong. Whether it be through the attainment of financial independence or the

reclaiming of her voice, her perseverance exemplifies a spirit of resilience that is not limited by national boundaries (Ali 63 & López 72). There is a strong connection between the intersection of caste and gender in Indian society and Ammu's actions of rebellion. Not only is her forbidden love an act of passion, but it is also a direct challenge to the structures that are designed to keep women from speaking their minds.

Through her, Roy shows resistance as an assertion of self-determination that is both personal and revolutionary (Thomas, 145). On the other hand, Sula isn't going to comply with any of the expectations that society has for her; her rebellion is sweeping and she doesn't apologize for it. She is not content to merely challenge gender stereotypes; rather, she is adamantly opposed to any social limits that seek to define her. As a result of her daring pursuit of liberty, she has become a symbol of bold revolt, which challenges conventional concepts of morality and conformity (Morrison, 120 & Brown, 78). These accounts, when taken as a whole, shed light on the myriad of ways in which women manage oppression, whether it be through subtle resistance, personal revolt, or radical independence. That empowerment is not a predetermined endpoint but rather a constant negotiation of identity, survival, and resistance is demonstrated by these examples. These novels broaden our knowledge of what it genuinely means to be strong by shedding light on how factors such as race, caste, migration, and gender intersect in the process of molding the hardships presented by the characters (Patel, 83 & Hughes, 91).

THEMATIC ALIGNMENT WITH THE FEMME FATALE:

The traditional archetype of the femme fatale must be collectively deconstructed and supplanted with nuanced representations of powerful women that exemplify complexity and fortitude. Nazneen, Ammu, and Sula are survivors of oppression, but they are also women who actively confront and traverse institutions that are designed to imprison them. Their

experiences shed light on the transforming power of individuals who, despite being excluded by the rules of society, regain their agency on their terms. For example, Nazneen resists oppression within the confines of a diasporic community, Ammu boldly confronts caste and gender hierarchies in India, and Sula unapologetically rejects societal expectations in her African American neighborhood. Each of these individuals defies oppression in ways that are shaped by their respective cultural landscapes. It is via their acts that they expose the profoundly ingrained systems of race, gender, and class that strive to constrain them (Ali 65; Roy 173 & Morrison 119). This can be accomplished through silent defiance, impassioned rebellion, or radical autonomy. The combination of their narratives presents a challenge to the conventional stereotype of the femme fatale, shifting the emphasis away from seduction and danger and toward resiliency, adaptability, and empowerment. Their narratives demonstrate how literature from around the world reinterprets female agency, depicting women not as passive figures or cautionary stories but rather as agents of change. It is not by compliance that Nazneen, Ammu, and Sula reinvent what it means to be powerful; rather, it is through survival, resistance, and self-determination. This is accomplished through their challenges, which are separate from one another yet intertwined. The adventures that they have taken serve to remind us that female power is not a static concept but rather a dynamic force that is influenced by both individual experiences and the reality of culture. The expansion of our concept of the femme fatale is one of how these characters contribute to the development of a literary discourse about gender, power, and identity in a globalized society (Patel 2021 & Zhang 2020).

CONCLUSION:

In weaving the threads the weaving together of three works: *Brick Lane* by Monica Ali, *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy, and *Sula* by Toni Morrison. This tapestry depicts the femme fatale shedding her usual appearance of seduction and danger to become a more

subversive force of transformation. In each of the novels, the protagonist is a woman who is rewriting her fate in ways that transcend limitations while navigating the volatile intersections of culture, power, and identity. The path that Nazneen takes in *Brick Lane* is one of quiet resilience, with her agency developing in the shadows of the unseen limits that come with being a diaspora. Her forbidden love serves as an act of defiance against the traditions that want to limit her, and it is through this love that Ammu, the protagonist of *The God of Small Things*, rebels against the rigid structures of caste and patriarchy. In the meantime, Sula, in Morrison's multi-layered tale, boldly redefines the borders of her community. She asserts her sovereignty with an audacity that both captivates and unsettles the audience. The burden of cultural restraint is something that these women, despite their differences, can relate to, and they can overcome it in their unique ways. They destroy expectations and remodel the stereotype of the femme fatale, converting her from an object of danger into a symbol of defiance. This can be accomplished by subtle resistance, radical individuality, or the daring to conceive a world that is beyond the roles that have been assigned to them. The juxtaposition of their narratives creates a symphony of resiliency, featuring the reclaiming of space by the unseen, the finding of voice by the mute, and the emergence of change agents by those who were traditionally disregarded. They contribute to the enrichment of a transnational discourse that recognizes and respects both the hushed defiance of the unrecognized and the brazen audacity of the revolutionary with their combined efforts.

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