



## ADVANCE SOCIAL SCIENCE ARCHIVE JOURNAL

Available Online: <https://assajournal.com>  
 Vol. 05 No. 01. Jan-March 2026. Page# 1564-1571  
 Print ISSN: [3006-2497](https://doi.org/10.30662/2497-3006) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](https://doi.org/10.30662/2500-3006)  
 Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](https://openjournal.org)



## Negotiating Feminisms and Diaspora: Analyzing Gender Identity in the Works of Toni Morrison *Beloved* and Min Jin Lee *Pachinko*

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### ABSTRACT

*The study examines the theme of resistance and empowerment in Toni Morrison *Beloved* (1987) and Min Jin Lee *Pachinko* (2017) through the theatrical framework of radical postcolonial feminism and diaspora in their writings. In particular, the research paper explores how gender identity has been portrayed in cultural, racial, and historical structures in *Beloved* (1987) by Morrison and *Pachinko* (2017) by Lee. The research study explores and highlights the portrayal of the plight of women in their respective diasporic experiences the predicament of the African American women after the slavery and the Korean women in their displacement in Japan. The analysis focuses how the two authors demonstrate the strength and power of women despite the oppression of patriarchy and race through the lens of postcolonial and intersectional feminism. The finding reveals that both novels portray the value of motherhood and sacrifice; they further find the cultural and historical barriers that were so specific to women in various diasporic situations. In trying to draw parallels between these works, the study would highlight the necessity of a thorough study of gender and identity in reference to the interrelationship between the perspectives of race, class, and diaspora, in order to identify the feminine voice in world literature.*

**Keywords:** *Feminism, motherhood, cultural displacement, Diaspora, identity.*

### Introduction

Feminism and Diaspora are two concepts that are strongly intertwined and influence the experiences and identities of women, in particular, the marginalized ones, on a significant level. In the literary context, comparison between feminisms helps to investigate the diversity of feminist orientations emerging out of diverse cultural, racial and geographical origins. The works of Toni Morrison and Min Jin Lee are full of literature to explore the gender and identity intersection in the diasporic experience. African American writer Morrison explores the consequences of slavery and racial mistreatment whereas a Korean-American writer Lee explores the theme of migration, cultural displacement, and racial discrimination. This comparison is based on the concept of gender and identity as it is presented in *Beloved* (1987)

by Morrison and Pachinko (2017) by Lee and compares it through the prism of comparing feminism and Diaspora by considering the predicaments of the characters in both stories.

Intersection of gender, identity, and diaspora has frequently been the point of feminist discourse, which is prominent in works by such authors as Toni Morrison and Min Jin Lee. The comparative feminisms have emphasized the need to understand women in different cultural, racial and geographical contexts. This approach will attempt to subvert western feminism values that are more centric and trend by incorporating the voices of varied status, especially those shaped by migrations and displacement (Mohanty, 2003). Here, the diaspora will include physical movement of people as well as emotional and cultural movement of individuals and communities. It is in this context the works of Morrison and Lee are critically analyzed.

The novel *Beloved* by Toni Morrison was published in 1987 and is concerned with the effects of slavery on African American females that continue to shape their identities in connection with their race and gender. Sethe is the main character who is haunted by the events she went through as a former slave and the choices she had to make to protect her kids against the same fate. The story by Morrison explores the intersection of race, gender, and trauma and proves that the African American woman had to struggle in the post-slavery society characterized by oppressive attitudes (Tate, 1983). Likewise, Min Jin Lee with *Pachinko* (2017) represents the experiences of the Korean women in Japan that highlights the intersecting nature of gender, race, and migration. The book is an account of Korean immigrants and their children who must struggle to find their way through patriarchal society and adjust to the fact that their ethnicity is being marginalized. The novel by Lee illuminates the experience of diasporic and how the migration process may lead to gender inequality and cultural displacement (Kim, 2019).

This study discusses gender and identity representation in the works of Morrison and Lee in terms of feminisms, and how the experiences of diasporas shape the lives of women. *Beloved* and *Pachinko* equally offer deep understanding on the aspect of determination and empowerment of women who encounter the challenges of patriarchal system as well as racial and cultural barriers that diaspora pose. In the light of the analysis of these texts, a more profound understanding of the processes of negotiating gender and identity in the context of the larger process of migration, race, and cultural displacement will be gained.

### **Research Questions**

1. How do the female characters in *Beloved* and *Pachinko* negotiate and resist borderline systems of racial, cultural, and patriarchal control and how does the resistance practices indicate or problematise feminist conceptualizations of agency in the diasporic and migratory?
2. Why do the black African and Korean female need to interrogate patriarchal oppression and diasporic displacement in the construction of gender identity and self-empowerment in selected texts?

### **Review of Literature**

Since numerous years, researchers have given considerable focus to the analysis of the relations between comparative feminisms, gender, and diaspora concerning the literature. The aim of the Feminist discourse, especially that in the postcolonial and diasporic spheres, is to illuminate the actual lives of the disadvantageous women who are exposed to different types of oppression due to their racial, gender, and cultural affiliations. Taking *Beloved* (1987) by Toni Morrison and *Pachinko* (2017) by Min Jin Lee as the comparison objects, one can better understand the impact of various forms of diaspora on the gender roles and identity in literature. The present literature review highlights the current discussion in the field of comparative feminisms and diaspora that focuses on the theme of trauma, motherhood, and cultural displacement as presented in the works of Morrison and Lee.

**Comparative Feminisms in Diasporic Contexts**

Diasporic feminism focuses on the special challenges faced by the women in the diasporic community that include the questions of identity, belonging and cultural amalgamation. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) also argues that feminist discourse must take into account the cultural and historical specificities of the lives of non-Western women since general feminist approaches tend to ignore the complexities of the lives of non-Western women. The attack of western feminism made by Mohanty is particularly relevant when discussing the literary works of Toni Morrison and Min Jin Lee because both authors depict their characters, who are not only oppressed because of their gender but also because of their race and diasporic roots. These women also have to maneuver patriarchal structures in their respective communities at the same time, having to deal with racial and cultural exclusion in the broader society.

In *Beloved*, Morrison explores the legacy of slavery on African American women. The storytelling by Morrison as described by Claudia Tate (1983) is that of the intersection of both race and gender in shaping the identity of black women. Sethe is one of the characters who suffered greatly due to her traumatic past, and there are the emotional and psychological injuries inflicted by slavery. The feminist approach of Morrison can enlighten both on com-modification and exploitation of the body of black women, and on how these women can be strong and resilient even in the conditions of dehumanization. This is in line with the argument by Patricia Hill Collins (2000) who argues that black feminist thought is concerned with the lived experiences of the black woman and her special struggles in addressing the oppressions that are both racial and gender-related. Equally, the book *Pachinko* by Min Jin Lee explores the issue of Korean women living within Japan based on the ways that their identities are influenced by their migration and cultural displacement. H. J. Kim (2019) argues that *Pachinko* helps to shed light on the interrelationship between gender and ethnicity as it is experienced by Korean women who become marginalized by their own communities and Asian society in general. The main character is Sunja, who struggles with her motherhood, daughterhood, and wifeness, and manages to overcome the racial biases that she had to face as a Korean in Japan. The feminist story of Lee introduces the complexity of lives of women in diaspora, the manner in which migration, financial hardships and cultural dislocation have been played out in gender roles.

**Trauma, Motherhood, and Gendered Identity.**

Both Morrison and Lee emphasize the significance of motherhood in the lives of the women of their characters, and introduce it as the place of resistance and self-sacrifice. In *Beloved*, the fact that Sethe decides to kill her daughter so that she does not have to suffer the horrors of slavery is an indication of a maternal rebellion against a society that strives to control and manipulate the bodies of the black women (Tate, 1983). The gender identity exploration in the novel is based on the dual experience of trauma that Sethe goes through as a slave woman and a mother. The trauma of Sethe, the main character, as described by Morrison, is familiar to the feminist critique of female bodies being repeatedly the target of violence and oppression, and it serves to highlight the importance of women resisting and surviving. The element of motherhood is also evident in *Pachinko*, with Sunja making all her choices because she does not want her kids to be exposed to the negative aspects of the world her people, the Korean, go through in Japan. Kim (2019) shows that, in the role of a mother, Lee portrays Sunja as resilient, as she has to face the issue of poverty, cultural isolation, and racial prejudice to raise her children. The idea of sacrifice is central to the idea of Sunja as a mother because she always undertakes difficult decisions to ensure that her family is well off. The way Lee tries to explore the issues of motherhood reflects the feminist debate that has covered the role of women in diasporic communities where mothers are sometimes subjected to a lot of pressure by the cultural and societal expectations.

**Diasporic Feminism Culture Displacement and Identity.**

Both *Beloved* and *Pachinko* explore the issue of cultural displacement, the way diasporic women are being affected by the migration and historical trauma. In *Beloved*, Morrison presents a cultural and psyche displacement that the African American women experienced in the post slavery period. The inability of Sethe to completely integrate into her community is an example of how slavery has remained to exert its effect on black identity even with the trauma of displacement and estrangement to the culture remaining. Valerie Smith (1987) points out the importance of community in the healing process that Morrison accentuates the idea that Sethe can only reconcile with her past with the assistance of other black women. *Pachinko* by Lee depicts the situation of cultural displacement of Korean immigrants in Japan, and how they are constantly regarded as outsiders even though they spent several generations living in Japan. The plight of Sunja would fit the life experience of a society that views her as inferior and that of the diaspora at large that has a struggle of being caught between two worlds. Kim (2019) notes that the depiction of cultural displacement by Lee focuses on the contradictions of the diasporic identity, particularly in the case of women who have to cope with the demands of their cultural communities on one hand and experience discrimination in the mainstream society.

**Comparative Analysis, Feminist Implication.**

By comparing the works of Morrison and Lee, we will have an insight on how gender and cultural identity are formed based on historical and cultural contexts. The stories of diaspora, trauma, and resistance offered by Morrison, who focuses on the experience of African American women in slavery, and Lee, who depicts the life of Korean women in Japan, offer dissimilar yet related visions of the phenomenon. The two authors emphasize the importance of motherhood and community in their descriptions of the strength of women, as well as criticizing the patriarchal and racial structures that seek to control their bodies and their identity. The fact that both Morrison and Lee use intersectional feminist models is instrumental in understanding the complexity of the diasporic identity. Kimberle Crenshaw, in her work of 1991, holds that intersectionality is crucial in terms of investigating the interaction of different versions of oppressions like racism, sexism and cultural displacement in shaping the experiences of the marginalized women. The relative comparison of both *Beloved* and *Pachinko* depicts that diasporic women find their way of coping with these overlapping oppressions through their agency and their strength to withstand and fight back. The authors state that it is claimed that Wajiran, W., and Apriyani, T. (2025). Racial, gender and identity in works by Toni Morrison: Significance to modern challenges in Black women in the United States p.12 (1). This study will discuss the role the works of Morrison, including *Beloved*, play in challenging institutional racism, sexism, and the multi-generational trauma, their relevance in the present context of exploring identity and intersectionality of Black women. Noor, A. (2025). In Min Jin Lee, *Pachinko*, Cultural adaptation and generation identity in *Pachinko* This article discusses the cultural adaptation processes experienced by the Korean immigrants in various generations in *Pachinko*, through the acculturation theory of Berry, the paper analyses how gender and diaspora can influence the process of negotiation of diasporic identity in *Pachinko*.

**Research Methodology**

It is a qualitative study hence, the comparative literary analysis approach is used to examine how gender, identity and diaspora have been treated in Toni Morrison *Beloved* (1987) and Min Jin Lee, *Pachinko* (2017). Focusing on trauma, motherhood, and cultural displacement, the approach is based on the feminist literary criticism and postcolonial theory. The theoretical framework of the study is based on the examination of the texts and the comparison of feminist theories. It aims at identifying, comparing, and contrasting how women experience is depicted by Morrison

and Lee in African American and Korean diasporic environments. This methodology is premised on the work of feminist researchers like that of Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003), who stresses the necessity to understand the experience of women in terms of its cultural and historical framework. Also, Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) presents the theory of intersectionality that emphasizes the intersection of race, gender and other oppressive factors that determine individual experiences. It is this frame used to investigate how the characters in the works written by Morrison and Lee demonstrate the complexity of the diasporic identity, motherhood, and trauma.

The comparison is made between thematic issues like trauma, motherhood, and cultural displacement, which gives a more detailed insight into how Morrison and Lee portray the nuances of female identity under the influence of the situation peculiar to their era and culture. The authors use the experience of their protagonists to focus on more general problems of race, gender, and diaspora. By the juxtaposition between post slavery experiences of Sethe as an African American woman and Sunja as a Korean immigrant in Japan, the analysis highlights the similarities and differences in how gender and identity are constructed across different diasporic experiences. The comparative character of the methodology is grounded in the works of comparative feminists like Mohanty (2003), who suggest the study of feminist problems in the environment of particular cultures and history, as well as the realization of the global dimension of gender suppression. By doing so, the study will be able to explore how the portrayal of gender and identity by Morrison and Lee, connect to the wider issue of feminism and diaspora, as well as indicate the specific cultural setting in which these works are situated.

### **Finding and Discussion**

In the textual analysis, the researcher explores the intersection of comparative feminisms, gender and the diaspora as represented in *Beloved* by Toni Morrison and *Pachinko* by Min Jin Lee. The two novels are also solidly embedded within the historical and cultural sufferings, and they explore how the diasporic women face racial, gender, and cultural oppressions; are seen through the eyes of the two female characters. Discussing such topics as motherhood, cultural displacement, trauma, and identity, this analysis is meant to highlight how both Morrison and Lee convey the lived experiences of the marginalized women in the broader context of feminist and diasporic theory.

### **Survival in Diaspora and Motherhood.**

The issue of motherhood is central to the exposition of the themes of oppression, resistance, and survival of the characters in *Beloved* and *Pachinko*. Both Sethe in *Beloved* and Sunja in *Pachinko* are both influenced by the forces of history, race and gender, as mothers. The choice that Sethe in *Beloved* takes to kill her daughter in a bid to protect her against the atrocities of slavery is a good example of how motherhood can be both highly traumatizing and also resilience building. Morrison makes use of Sethe as a mother to explain how slavery dehumanizes black women as it lowers them to their reproductive functions and fails to give them their independence. Infanticide does not mean that Sethe denies her motherhood, but the final statement of the fact that she is in control of the fate of her child, she does not allow her daughter to go through the same inhumane system that she herself went through. The point is that, according to Morrison, Sethe did not have four legs but two, and she could decide between the best and the best (Morrison, 1987, p. 251). Nonetheless, this choice resulted in a tragedy, which shows a complicated interplay of maternal affection, individual freedom, and long-term effects of slavery.

On the same note, the life of Sunja in *Pachinko* is centered on her roles as a mother and her unending attempts to protect her children against the discrimination and misfortunes they are

faced with as Koreans in Japan. The fact that Sunja is a single-mother who never gives up, pushes the story through and similarly to Sethe, her decision-making is often guided by society that marginalizes her based on her gender and ethnicity. Lee introduces Sunja as a woman who sacrifices her own dreams in favor of the welfare of her children, and it is the traditional needs of females in patriarchal and diasporic societies. The weight of sacrifice and endurance in diaspora, however, is a distinctly feminine burden as Sunja reflects, "It is the lot of a woman to suffer (Lee, 2017, p. 39). Lee explores the complexities of motherhood in a diasporic setting through Sunja as such women are denied their traditional roles as nurturers and caregivers due to their cultural displacement and racial prejudice.

#### **Trauma and the Past of Historical Violence.**

Both novels depict the theme of trauma as a major part of the diasporic experiences in the lives of the characters. The effects of slavery go on to plague Sethe and her people in the novel *Beloved*, forming a common trauma that defines their personalities. The narrative structure employed by Morrison is an indication of the orienting implications of trauma by giving faulty chronology and grasp-of-consciousness passages, how the past persistently invades the present. The daughter of Sethe, who passed on, *Beloved*, is a physical manifestation of this trauma that compels Sethe to address the emotional wounds of her slavery life. Morrison explains that Sethe feels that her past was a pack of hounds after her (Morrison, 1987, p. 25), and this fact shows that slavery trauma cannot be avoided by Sethe and other ex-slaves. Equally, the historical trauma of violence heavily affects the experiences of diaspora by the characters injected in *Pachinko*. In the novel, the experience of a Korean family during several generations in Japan is determined by the trauma of the war and colonization, as well as discrimination. The family of Sunja deals with the violence of Japanese occupation of Korea, the issues of migration, and the systemic racism of Koreans in Japan. Lee shows how this historic trauma is bequeathed generation after generation with every member of the family struggling to find their cultural identity as well as to find their place of marginalization in Japanese society. An example is the son of Sunja who is Noa who inherits the racial discrimination that he has experienced and eventually ends up denying his Korean heritage which results in his tragic death by suicide. The issue of intergenerational trauma described by Lee is a reflection of the more general diasporic narrative of being displaced culturally and affected by historical violence on identity formation.

#### **Diasporic Identity Cultural Displacement.**

Cultural displacement is another theme that has been at the forefront in both *Beloved* and *Pachinko* because the two novels explore the theme of migration and historical trauma and their impact on the identities of both the characters in the book. In *Beloved*, the black characters suffer cultural erosion in their own nation since the legacy of slavery, which remains, creates a sense of displacement and isolation between their African races and their American selves. Namely, Sethe struggles to establish herself in her community, where her traumatic past puts a wall between her and other people. Morrison emphasizes the importance of community and collective memory to overcome this cultural displacement because Sethe can only reconcile herself with her past with the help of other black women, especially to her friend Paul D. and the fraternity of the former slaves. The *Pachinko* novel explores such theme as cultural displacement as it portrays the struggles of the Korean immigrants in Japan, which is constantly perceived by the immigrants as the outcasts yet the immigrants are the ones who have been residing in Japan over a number of generations. The family of Sunja is left in the middle of two cultures. They struggle to find their identity between their Korean heritage and the demands of the Japanese society. The characters have had to endure both internal and external tensions caused by their cultural displacement that Lee has worked well in portraying the hardships of the characters with

their diasporic identities. An example is the son Noa of Sunja who adopts the name of a Japanese and attempts to become a Japanese to avoid being discriminated against as a Korean but ends up becoming alienated and facing identity crisis. The fact that Lee describes cultural displacement in a way that is complicated highlights the complexity of the concept of diasporic identity, especially when it comes to women that have to struggle with the demands of their respective cultural groups, in addition to the hostility they face in the wider world.

#### **Intersectionality: Gender, Race and Diaspora.**

The interrelation of gender, race and diaspora is stressed by Morrison and Lee when they represent female characters. The intersectionality theory by Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) comes into play to a great extent in this analysis as she emphasizes on the intersection of all forms of oppression like racism, sexism and cultural displacement to influence the experiences of the marginalized people. In *Beloved*, Sethe has not only gender and motherhood experiences that affect the identity, but also her race and the legacy of slavery. The picture that Morrison has created of Sethe is reflective of the African American women as a whole whose lives were deeply influenced by the negative aspects of race and gender oppression. In the same way, in the *Pachinko*, the identity of the protagonist, Sunja, is also shaped by her life as a Korean woman living in Japan where she has to face racial, as well as gender-based discrimination. Lee in her depiction of Sunja highlights how unique the plight of the women in the diasporic communities is, as they have to contend with the patriarchies in their respective communities as well as racial hierarchies of the wider community.

#### **Conclusion**

The stories of *Beloved* by Toni Morrison and *Pachinko* by Min Jin Lee give detailed accounts of how gender, race and diaspora are related to each other. Both authors make their contribution to the broader debate of comparative feminisms and the diasporic identity through the discussion of the issues of trauma, motherhood, and cultural displacement. Nonetheless, the research methodology of under study is founded on the feminist literary approach and postcolonial theory, in which the interconnections of gender, race, and diaspora are stressed. This paper seeks to make a descriptive analysis of how Toni Morrison and Min Jin Lee, in *Beloved* and *Pachinko* respectively discuss the complexity of the female self as it relates to the diaspora and historical trauma. This approach will help to better understand how personal experiences and the overall social impact predetermine the formation of gender and identity, and how these subjects are reflected in modern literature. This discussion explores the complex treatment of gender and identity as well as diaspora in literature by comparing two works of *Beloved* by Toni Morrison and *Pachinko* by Min Jin Lee. Both the authors also discuss the effects of historical trauma, cultural displacement and motherhood on the female characters of the respective stories and this brings out the interrelated issues of gender, race and diaspora in their narrations. Morrison and Lee criticize the attempts of patriarchal and racial structures to control the bodies and identities of women and emphasize the strength and independence of women in the struggle against them through the experiences of their main characters.

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