

**PORTRAYAL OF STRESS RESISTANT PERSONALITIES:  
A COMPARATIVE STUDY IN TONE MORRISON'S *HOME* AND  
MICHAEL ONDAATJE'S *THE ENGLISH PATIENT***

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**Abstract**

*Post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a severe state of psychological imbalance, is quite common today. The most fruitful way to overcome this disorder is to become a stress-resistant personality. Stress-resistant persons practice three basic skills – a) reasonable mastery, b) developing caring attachments to others, and c) commitment to some goals (Flannery25). Symptoms of Post traumatic stress disorder are listed and an attempt is made to trace out the symptoms in the protagonists. Toni Morrison's Home and Michael Ondaatje's The English Patient are the novels chosen for comparison. Home is set against the Korean War background and The English Patient against the Second World War. Since the selected works have strong war background, it is justified that the novels can be given psychological approach. The researcher's primary aims are to trace out the victims of post-traumatic stress disorder and to compare the various stress resistant traits manifested by the characters in the select novels.*

**Key Words:-** *Trauma, Stress, Post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), Stress-resistant personalities, Psychological approach*

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The term *stress* is quite common in every sphere of human activity. Post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), a severe state of psychological imbalance, which has been resulted from an individual's exposure to one or more traumatic events such as witnessing the death of dear ones, serious physical injury or the sexual harassments, is getting popular in the present scenario. Symptoms of Post-traumatic stress disorder can be classified into three basic types – a) Physical Symptoms, b) Intrusive Symptoms and c) Avoidant Symptoms. The first type includes Hyper vigilance, Startle response, insomnia, Memory loss and Mood irritability. The second called, Intrusive Symptoms, cover Distressing recollection of thoughts, nightmares and flashbacks. Avoidant Symptoms contains Avoiding specific thoughts, feelings, Activities or situations, reduced interests in significant activities and restricted emotions. ( Flannery 11)

As Raymond B. Flannery states that the most fruitful way to overcome this disorder is to become a stress-resistant personality. He further lists out three basic skills for them – a) reasonable mastery, b) developing caring attachments to others, and c) commitment to some goals. He says in his *Victim's Guide*,

Stress-resistant persons were able to maintain good physical and mental health as well as enjoy a sense of well-being, by utilizing these three general sets of skills in dealing with the many stressful life events. (25)

Toni Morrison's *Home* and Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* are the novels chosen for comparison. Since the selected works have strong war background, it is justified that the novels can be given psychological approach. The researcher's primary aims are to trace out the victims of post-traumatic stress disorder and to compare the various stress resistant traits manifested by the characters in the select novels.

Morrison's latest novel, *Home*, faithfully documents the contemporary racial bias that leads the black into various psychological issues. The creation paints the soul terrifying impacts of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, as such. The back ground of Korean War lays strong foundation for Post-traumatic stress disorder in the protagonists Frank Money and Ycidra, his beloved sister (Morisson 6). The crucial medical abuse played on Ycidra caused her severe impairments both physically and mentally. The novel manifests

the impact of war casualties, exploitation of workers, racial as well as economical segregation, through the sufferings of the protagonist.

The very first chapter opens in a place with plenty of scary warning signs; the two kids crawled through the grass on their bellies looking out for snakes. The kids are new to the place, but not to the environment. Their lives are submitted to atrocities such as the burial of a black which makes the little Cee tremble.

Both Frank and Cee are the real victims of post-traumatic stress disorder, as the two meet a series of traumas in their lives. Throughout the novel, the author manifests chronic disorder in Frank Money. The novel opens with the simile, which describes the horses, the symbol of war – ‘They rose up like men. We saw them. Like men they stood.’ (Morrison 1) The very word ‘war’ makes us scared of its casualties. The readers meet Frank, not during the war but on his way back. The hallucinatory effects, which make the novel more influential, show the inhuman aspects of war.

Lenore, Frank’s step-grandmother, ill treated the children, especially Cee, very much. She poured water instead of milk in their food; gave them corporal punishments, for which the kids had to blame some other things. The girl, later, escaped from the punishments with the help of her big brother.

Once, the kids Frank and Cee, went to a scary place, full of warning signs. There the little child’s body begins to tremble, on seeing the burial of a black. It is Frank, who pacified her – ‘I hugged her shoulders tight and tried to pull her trembling into my own bones because, as a brother four years older, I thought I could handle it.’ (Morrison 4)

Frank, as a young man, was not at all an enthusiastic hero. His tender heart dreaded to join the military, indeed. But the impact of war is so strong that he could not come out of the hallucinatory realism. Even a positive quote from the Bible which gets his instant appreciation, opens, the next moment, gates of dead realities – Mike, Stuff and Red.

The protagonist’s soul mates-- Mike, Stuff and Red-- are the real victims of war. Mike, at his last hours, was in the arms of Frank who had yelled at him to stay back. He beat away the birds which were so aggressive, from his friend’s body. In the case of Stuff, Frank went in search of the blasted arm which was located twenty feet away. Red, their army friend, especially of Stuff, was also dead. His body parts that had been found were so little to occupy a whole stretcher. Mike’s death changed him totally. The boys had played together, giggled together; argued, fought, laughed, and even enlisted together. Frank, who dreaded and even felt nervous after a kill, became so violent -- ‘Now, with Mike gone, he was brave, whatever that meant.’ (Morrison 98)

He even turned to be a sadist, that ‘The copper smell of blood no longer sickened him; it gave him appetite.’ (Morrison 98) On his way to Georgia, he heard the yelling of women. He hurried to the place and wondered at the silent man who had gazed at the fight between two women. Frank had punched him till the later became unconscious. The women only rescued him from Frank. The man was almost, beaten to death. Frank who once felt nervous after a kill becomes excited at the wild joy the fight had given him.

Frank tried his level best to save his home boys. But he could not. He was not ready to surrender any more life in the cruel hands of death, especially not of his beloved sister Ycidra. Mr. Scott is both a doctor and a researcher who has been constructing instruments to examine the womb. He inhumanly misused poor girls, including Cee, for his research. Sarah, servant of the doctor, is not aware of the brutality. On seeing the changes in Cee – 'loss of weight, her fatigue, and how long her periods were lasting'. Sarah becomes bold enough to write the scary letter to Frank, Cee's only relative: "Come fast, she be dead if you tarry." (Morrison 8--113 )

Frank felt at home, when he was in the Bookers' diner, where he opened his mouth voluntarily. The Locks treated him well, but he had been so tired that his trembling soul could not recognize the parental care. Further, the 'dream dappled with body parts' that he had there made him uncomfortable (Morrison 16). When he had been with Lily, he had no such nightmares.

Frank, once, saw an ambulance in which a little girl had been taken care. Blood ran from her nose. The sight made Frank totally upset. He spent a few nights on the park bench, till the cops drive him away. He went to a dry cleaner's shop where he met a lady named Lily. Lily enjoyed her life with Frank, at first. Later, she felt the indifference. She, most of the time, found him sitting idle. She was totally stunned. In a church congregation, Frank and Lily served the mass with fried chicken happily. Frank ran out of the crowd, on seeing a little girl smiling at him. Lily was totally stunned. She returned to the apartment all alone and felt relieved to find her house empty. Frank, later, returned to the house and made a vow that the act will not be repeated. They remained in the same house and led a normal life but the relationship ended up in failure.

Lily's sewing skills brought her reputation. She made her mind to open a dress making shop. When she asked Frank what is his goal, he replied, 'Stay alive.' (76) Frank did not pay her goal any attention and what made her more miserable was that he had no such ambition in life. Frank does remember her, every now and then. He knew it very well that her very presence would free him from all the mental suffocations. But he does not long for her company. Even though he is tortured with the hallucinations, he is ready to have some nightmare, if it were to tell him something about his sister. He is, indeed, emotionally well balanced in the case of Cee. He is crystal clear in his words and deeds regarding Cee.

Toni Morrison does not add any imaginative colors to make Frank a perfect hero. As an ordinary human being, he too, had committed a great sin that haunted him every now and then. He shot a little girl dead, instead of controlling his own lust. To save his good man image, he went to that extend, without knowing the role of conscience.

Frank confesses the truth, which he wants to hide from himself. Frank only shot the girl dead. The truth haunts him every minute. It damaged his self image and terrified his soul to the core. He consciously suffocated himself with big-time mourning for his dead

friends, because it kept the Korean child hidden.

The ever-astonishing relationship of the brother and sister is so much intrinsically connected that they could not even be separated from the hands of Post-traumatic stress disorder. While Cee's brother, Frank has been suffering from faded memory, trembling, repetitive flashbacks, horrible nightmares and hallucinatory realism, Cee meets a number of traumas. A grandmother's role in the development of a child's psyche is best presented in the novel, especially in the IV chapter. Main theme of the chapter is given in the first line itself: 'A mean grandmother is one of the worst things a girl could have.' (Morrison 43) Lenore agreed to take care of the child only on account of the fact that 'the four years -old brother was clearly the mother to infant.' (Morrison 88) She showered love and care only on her wealth not on any human being. She is chiefly an egotist, whose superstitions and false modesty made the children aliens. Instead of pitying the child's birth on the roadside, she took it as a 'prelude to a sinful, worthless life.' (Morrison 44) The discomforts – a howling baby and the crowded house, increased her hatred towards Cee.

Every adult in the town corrected Cee; especially, Frank prevented her from all the evils including flirtation. But, they failed to let Cee lead her own life. Cee, from her childhood, followed each and every word of Frank closely. As the novelist says, 'his instructions were specific, his cautions clear. But he never warned her about rats.' (Morrison 52)

Throughout her life, Cee leads a shadow life. But the shadow starts to disappear when the reality enlisted. Cee fell in love with Principal, the first man who approached her. He was a visitor from Atlanta. All the Lotus girls were impressed with his 'big city – accent, knowledge and wide experience.' (Morrison 48) Especially, Cee believed every bit of word that came from his mouth. He married her and took her to Atlanta, where she was left all alone. When she found him a fraudster, who married her for an automobile, she was broken. The broken heart, as usual, longed for the presence of Frank: 'If Frank were there he would once more touch the top of her head with four fingers, or stroke her nape with his thumb.' (Morrison 53) The creeper is unable to survive without the strong banyan tree, Frank, the big brother. The medical abuse deepens the stress and paves way to the acute level of post-traumatic stress disorder. Cee never alarmed to hear Ethel that she cannot bear any children, at first. Later, she cried over the grief for hours. She did not allow her brother to pacify her. She was very specific in avoiding any redemption. She wanted to be a *self – dependent girl*.

Frank felt the indifference. His Cee was not the same who trembled and expected her brother to cure it. They gave him a new Cee who would never need any kind of support. But, she manifests pseudo-maturity. Even though she denied her brother to comfort her,

the refusal is not the result of her courage and maturity. It is due to her pseudo – maturity which can be broken only by her *real mother*, Frank. Frank took the first step to brought back his sister, Cee without any, further, hurt. Frank tried to unveil Cee’s pseudo – maturity, using their past memories. *The English Patient*, a Booker Prize-winning novel by Ondaatje deals with the lives of four dissimilar people during the Second World War. The four main charecters include: an unrecognizably-burned English man and his nurse, a Sikh British Army sapper and a Cannadian thief. The story centers around ‘the incremental revelations of the Englishman’s actions prior to his injuries, and the emotional effects of these revelations on the other characters.’ (*The English Patient n.p*)

The English patient underwent a ferocious fire burn, which makes him unidentifiable, not only at the physical level but also at the psychological level. His lost memory is restored little by little with the aid his book cum diary. Hana, the young nurse, who decides to dedicate her life in curing her English patient, takes every possible effort to make him better day by day; she decides to live in the ruined unsafe villa which needs immediate mending. The following description illustrates the insecurity –

It is still terrible out there. Dead cattle. Horses shot dead, half eaten. People hanging upside down from bridges. The last vises of war. Completely unsafe. The sappers haven’t gone in there yet to clear it. (Ondaatje 31)

The villa is far off to buy any kind of grocery and vegetables; so, she spends most of her time in gardening; has obtained some necessary things from a man who exchanges those with that of her vegetables; she reads some books to entertain her patient.

Caravaggio, a thief and a former neighbor of Hana, joins them in the villa. He hates her isolated life with the patient; he wants her to be married. The entrance of Caravaggio slowly unveils the post-traumatic stress disorder in Hana. Though her past is not revealed in a crystal clear manner, the author gives the readers a gist of her past then and there; she lost her dear father in the war; she made an abortion already, as the child’s father had been dead. The given details are quite little, yet very strong. These traumas – both personal and historical, make her an avoidant personality. She excludes herself from the outside world; she does this with the aid of her ‘despairing saint.’ (Ondaatje 1) She is all alone in the villa for quite a good number of moths. Though the English patient is living with her, he is a bed-confined; there is only little hope in making him alive, as he is injured severely. So, there is enough time for her to think over the pat which she did not in the first chapter.

Hana’s disorder came to limelight when she is seen half naked and shivering. Caravaggio gives her a piece of mind; but, that does not work. As she herself states, she is afraid of marriage:

'I was sick of the hunger. Of being just lusted at. So I stepped away, from the dates, the jeep rides, the courtship. .. I worked harder than others. Double shifts, under fire, did anything for them, emptied every bedpan... I wanted to go home and there was no one at home... I courted one man and he died and the child died. I mean the child didn't just die, I was the one who destroyed it... It has been a long time, David, since I thought of anything to do with a man.' (Ondaatje 91)

But things change, when she meets Kip, one of the soldiers, whose duty is to detect and remove the hidden bombs. She loves Kip. Under the name of love, she seeks solace under his arms. Once again it projects her in secured self.

Stress resistance is the healthy, positive and constructive solution to post-traumatic stress disorder. As Raymond B. Flannery says the stress –resistant persons have various positive attitudes including personal control, task involvement, making wise life-style choices, seeking social support and religious/ ethical value of concern for others (26).

Though Frank Money underwent the severe state of disorder, he overcomes the malady to safeguard and restore her *little Cee*. The restoration is his ultimate goal. This commitment makes him free from the disorder completely. In the case of Cee, she has no such commitments. But her new liking for life—the solace that the hard work offers—inspires her partially. Though she skillfully avoids Frank, it is not to be a long-lasting one. Finally, her detachment decreases and attachment increases, not only with his brother but with everyone in her village. Hana in *The English Patient*, like Frank, commits her life in curing her patient. Under the name of love, Hana seeks solace under her lovre's arms; Frank under his beloved's. This type seeking protection manifests their in secured selves. Both Hana and Frank Money try to isolate themselves from the outside world. Further, Frank shares some significant similarities with the English patient; both the protagonists face memory loss, when the novels open. As a sequel they have reoccurring flashbacks. Their level of post traumatic stress disorder is acute, while Hana and Cee are in their chronic state. The selected authors Toni Morrison and Michael Ondaatje, intentionally or unintentionally, make use of the ultimate solution to overcome the disorder by making the victims self resistant persons.

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