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Communicative Skin: Marginalization, Transformative Identity and Forced Tattoo Narratives in Joyce Carol Oates' *The Tattooed Girl*

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ABSTRACT

Discourses on tattoos often emphasize self-assertion and individual expression. However, the phenomenon of "forced tattooing"—the imposition of tattoos without the tattooee's deliberate consent—often remains overlooked despite its role in communicating complex narratives to those who behold them (Osterud, 2014, p. 56). This article investigates the novel The Tattooed Girl (2006) by Joyce Carol Oates, examining the untapped role of forced tattoos to unravel the transformative narrative of a marginalized woman. Drawing upon Mary Kosut's (2000) theory of tattoo narratives, the present study argues that Oates' protagonist Alma Busch's involuntarily inscribed tattoos function as non-verbal communicative channels, narrating her journey of self-reclamation from a doubly marginalized and submissive self. By examining the non-verbal and interpretive dimensions of Alma's tattoos, this article offers a new lens on forced tattoos as strategic narratives of silence, resilience, and transformative potential in literature, thus contributing to feminist discussions on body inscriptions as expressions of agency and reconfiguration. The article, therefore, invites a further scope on the intersection of body inscriptions, memory, ethics and culture as a potential area for future research in literary studies and beyond.

Keywords: Forced tattoo; fiction, Joyce Carol Oates, marginalized women, tattoo as communicative device, transformative identity

INTRODUCTION

Tattoos, as a body modification act, have an extensive history of documenting human identity. Over the ages and across cultures worldwide, tattoos have retained their gravitas by both being emblematic to celebratory as well as derogatory human attributes. From king to criminal, valour to vice, hierarchy to marginality, tattooing has been one of the most widespread socio-cultural phenomena with contrasting significance that has sustained and surpassed both positive and negative criticism yet is still glorified globally in the contemporary era (Atkinson, 2003; DeMello, 2007, 2014; Kuwuhara, 2020; Sachdeva & Rani, 2023). The conventional perception of tattoos is often stapled with the anecdotes of self-assertion and self-rebellion of individuals. However, apart from solely through the lens of assertive and willful submission by the tattoo recipient, instances where the decision to get a tattoo does not align with the individual's self-interest or voluntary choice are often left unattended (Barthel & Sanders, 2008, p. 47). This phenomenon, referred to as "forced tattooing", was particularly prevalent during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, often observed among tribal communities, marginalized working-class communities, and within prison environments (Osterud, 2014, p. 56). This study, therefore, calls into question the ensuing

challenges that individuals marked with forced tattoos encounter in society. It is thereby motivated by the need to carefully examine the communicative agency of forced tattoos and the identity of the tattoo bearer within the literature.

In literature, tattoos on female bodies often symbolize deep-seated personal histories and identity struggles of characters that often embody their life experiences of trauma, empowerment and transformation. As markers of identity, they engage with body politics and desire while also reaffirming marginalized voices against dominant patriarchal narratives (Al-Wadhaf & Omar, 2007; Chang, 2017). Tattooed bodies in fiction are frequently depicted as sites where personal narratives are etched, suggesting that identity itself is in a state of continuous inscription and reinterpretation. From Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851) to Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), tattooed characters exemplify individuals navigating the boundaries of autonomy, conformity and resistance. Even though tattooed skin embodies a verbal and non-verbal partnership, discussing "forced tattoos" problematizes the notion of agency over the imprinted tattoo, as it demonstrates the lack of self-assertive motive and significance.

In light of the forced tattoos, the paper proposes that even under such circumstances, tattoos function as communicative agents, being capable of narrativizing oppression, resistance, and transformation, reflecting the complex interplay between the individual's body and societal structures. Despite lacking personal agency, tattoos convey a wide array of personal, social, and cultural narratives through the skin, fostering non-verbal dialogues without the need for spoken words. Therefore, this paper addresses a critical gap in the literature: While the narratives of tattooed individuals often emphasize agency and personal choice, the experiences of those with forced tattoos, especially marginalized women, are notably underrepresented. Critics, including Michael Atkinson (2002), Victoria Pitts (2003), Lee Barron (2017) and Chris Martin (2019) have explored various dimensions of tattoo culture and its impacts on women, yet the experiences of women subjected to forced tattoos remained understudied. Thus, the paper seeks to address the following questions: How do individuals navigate their relationship with forced tattoos at the intersection of body, identity, and society? How are their stories communicated to others, and how are these tattoos interpreted when they are not self-chosen? Most importantly, how do these tattoos contribute to being considered transformative symbols of identity, resilience, and autonomy in the evolution of their individual identity? Keeping the abovementioned questions as the central aim for the present study, the article critiques the forced tattoos imprinted on the protagonist of the novel to investigate the insinuation of tattoos on contested bodies of women, addressing the broader social implications of forced tattoos as communicative agents that narrate oppression, resilience and transformation. This study remains relevant in today's context as it explores the intersection of forced tattoos, marginalization, and transformative identity while broadening the discourse on tattooed bodies of women in literature and contributing to feminist and identity studies.

Joyce Carol Oates, one of the globally acclaimed writers, expertly unravels the untouched dynamics of "forced tattoo" in her suspense thriller *The Tattooed Girl* (2006), weaving a tattooed narrative of the protagonist, Alma Busch, from a marginalized community called "white trash" by skillfully intertwining tattoo, marginalization, and transformative agency. By electing Alma Busch, a female marginalized protagonist from the "white trash" community of America that has been deprived by mainstream society for ages, Oates debunks "the constructed nature of whiteness and femininity" (Horeck, 2010, p. 26) in fiction. The tattoos engraved on the protagonist's body do not untwine her self-choice but rather describe a forceful intervention of the male authorities who not only (re)create or shape the tattoos on her skin but also (de)construct the potential

meanings to communicatively constitute her identity. Through interactive communications between the other characters, such as Dmitri, Joshua, and Jet, different meanings of her tattoos are co-constructed and interpreted non-verbally, which, along with framing and contextualizing Alma's identity, also extends a critical dimension to the understanding of her character in the novel. By adopting such an unconventional approach to tattoos and its vigilance in the singular piece of her entire literary oeuvre, Oates puts emphasis on the fact that the channelizing of silenced narratives of marginalized women through the communicative functionalities of tattoos is surmountable. Also, the dynamic alteration of Alma's tattoos morphing into different shapes as she responds to various emotions and societal influences narrativizes Alma's transformative trajectory. This dual role, one tattoo interpretation of tattoos, not only underscores their significance in reflecting personal identities but also highlights their broader societal and cultural implications, making them a focal point for narrativizing the unheard voices of marginalized women, altering their vulnerable and violent skin into a communicative one. In this way, the tattooed body of a marginalized woman in Oates' fictional work becomes a communicative body even though they are forcefully tattooed.

Historical instances of "forced tattooing", such as those in Greek and Roman cultures where criminals and slaves were marked as a deterrent to deviant behaviour, exemplify the punitive and stigmatizing use of tattoos (Osterud, 2014). These practices reinforced social hierarchies and perpetuated stereotypes, linking tattoos with criminality and marginalization (Adams, 2009; Caplan, 2000; Sundberg & Kjellman, 2018, p. 24). The narratives of forced tattoos are often intertwined with themes of violence, abuse, and captivity, reflecting the broader socio-political dynamics of power and control. In the regulation of stereotypes, institutional authority plays a crucial role in (re)creating the meaning of how a convict with tattoos produces social significance and conveys a message of shame and terror (Fenske, 2007). This perspective chronicles individuals, especially from marginalized groups, as predisposed to suspicion of criminal activities. Moreover, 'since tattoos on women are especially stigmatizing' when compared to imprints on a man's skin, they are no less but more susceptible to being acknowledged as degraded individuals in society. Tattoos forcefully inscribed on an individual's body overpower their autonomy and voice of freedom of voice or expression, leaving them contesting with psychological plights and distraught. In many marginalized groups, too, forced tattoos were facilitated to mark women's skin in order to perpetuate stereotypes and prejudices that stigmatize them with notions of savagery, criminality, and sexual promiscuity (Osterud, 2014, pp. 56-57). For instance, in nineteenth-century Native America, tattoos were used as indicators of captivity and subjugation, as documented in the primary account of forcibly tattooed women's captivity narratives (Barthel & Sanders, 2008, p. 49). These narratives highlight the intersection of body, identity, and women's autonomy, revealing how forced tattoos were used to exert control and suppress women's voices to manipulate, misrepresent, and alter their identities.

Braunberger (2000) introduces the term "tattoo rape" (p. 9) to demonstrate the violation of bodily autonomy through forced tattooing, particularly in contexts of sexual violence. His concept underscores the profound impact of forced tattoos, which hijack both the skin and the body, leaving lasting physical as well as psychological scars. One of the most recognized captivity narratives is the story of Olive Oatman, who was captured and tattooed by Native American tribes in the mid-nineteenth century. Her tattoos symbolized both her captivity and her complex identity caught between two cultures (Stratton et al., 1994). This duality is echoed in the stories of other women who were forcibly tattooed, such as Nora Hildebrandt, who was tattooed forcefully and later exhibited as a tattooed lady in circuses to promote her story of captivity, violence as well as

resilience by altering the pattern of these narratives (Mifflin, 2013). Following this, there is a surge of accepting, (re)claiming, and celebrating the scars of violence and winning over the authority of the body and identity, even when tattoos are not a symbol of individual choice and self-expression.

Influenced by such tattooed narratives of women, Joyce Carol Oates' novel *The Tattooed Girl* (2006) offers a literary exploration of captivity, violence, and resilience through the character Alma Busch, a marginalized woman marked with forcefully imposed tattoos symbolizing a silenced identity. The tattoos forcibly engraved on Alma represent not her self-choice but a coercive intervention by male authorities who inscribe and manipulate the meanings of the tattoos. Despite the imposition, the novel unfolds as a powerful testament to her strategic silence and resilience, illustrating Alma's agency in transforming her life while challenging stereotypes and marginalization. Oates' contribution and literary intervention lies not only in enunciating or expatiating their traumatic narratives but also in challenging the traditional ways in which the stories of silenced tattooed women and resilience are usually narrativized and communicated with the readers. Keeping Alma's silence unembellished, Oates posits it as both a remuneration of male violence and a reclamation of self by using forced tattoos as a living archive of resilience and transformation, creating a new matrix of silence, which is not vulnerable but strategic. Skin, as Haller Gilmer and Gregg (1961) note, never shuts like eyes and is a witness to everything happening, which also works as a "channel of communication" (p. 199). In examining tattoos as communicative devices, Kosut (2000) offers valuable insights where she reconceptualizes tattoos as visual messages about the body and self, contributing to societal interaction and rendering the tattooed body as "distinctively communicative" (p. 82). Tattoos, through images, designs, symbols, or words, function as communicative tools and convey complex, non-narratives about identity, culture, and personal experiences. Literature on forced tattooing, as introduced by Braunberger (2000) as "tattoo rape", addresses tattoos' violation of bodily autonomy but often overlooks their role as transformative agents in developing the identity of a marginalized woman. Alma's journey, like Hesters Prynne's silent rebellion in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), uses silence as political resistance, transforming tattoos of oppression into symbols of resilience and evolving selfhood. Person (1989) observes that the "effect of silence" can readily replace the "importance of speech" by analyzing "Hawthorne experimenting with the power of silence, with the active, political power of passive resistance" (p. 465). Similarly, Alma's tattoos serve as communicative conduits, reflecting a strategic motive to illustrate her transformative trajectory. Oates' technique of blending factual events with fiction in her novels highlights her women's struggles for autonomy and identity transformation within the broader spectrum of feminist discourse (Tromble, 2014). As Branaman (2019) elucidates in 'Feminism and Identity', women's identities are continuously negotiated and reshaped in response to social constraints, with feminist theory emphasizing the dynamic role of societal structures in the process. Building on this, Koller and Bullo (2018) argue that tattoos function as powerful emblems of resilience and identity reconstruction, enabling women to reclaim their bodies and articulate their vulnerabilities. Smith (2019) further emphasizes the communicative potential of tattoos, observing their capacity to share experiences of empowerment and inspire transformative journeys. Oates' situates her women characters in 'other spaces'-environments that simultaneously reflect and subvert societal norms, challenging the conventional narratives of transformative identity (Chen et al., 2022).

Within the recent body of literature of the novel, Alma is frequently analyzed through the lenses of oppression. Meuronen (2012) scrutinizes her as a subdued and manipulated identity, merely existing as 'the result of the gaze of the other' (p. 16). Xiao-dan (2014) discusses how socioeconomic status, appearance, and gender collectively constrain her individual growth, while

Wang (2018a, 2018b) perceives Alma as a victim within the male-dominated 'white trash' demographic, struggling to establish an individual identity. Sala (2022) identifies Alma's tattoos as visible markers of her physical as well as emotional scars. Despite the focused literary attention dedicated to Alma, the existing analyses fall short of recognizing her as an evolving and transformative identity to triumph over the challenges of poverty, victimization and prejudice. Therefore, the present analysis of the novel fills this gap by reframing Alma's forced tattoos as communicative agents that narrate her contested experiences and evolution from oppression to autonomy. By examining the non-verbal and interpretive dimensions of Alma's tattoos, this article offers a new lens on forced tattoos as strategic narratives of silence, resilience, and transformative potential in literature, thus contributing to feminist discussions on body inscriptions as expressions of agency and reconfiguration.

The significance of tattoos extends beyond a mere identity marker, encompassing dynamic communicative and performative dimensions that intersect with the notions of body, self-identity, and society. In this context, Mary Kosut's (2000) theoretical framework on *tattoo narratives* emerges to be a useful framework that conceptualizes tattoo as a communicative device employed to transmit messages pertaining to the body and self, thereby contributing to societal interaction, making a tattooed body "distinctively communicative" (p. 82). Kosut explains that instead of being a static tool, tattoo works as an agent of communication to those who perceive them visually. Tattoos, in the form of visual images, designs, symbols or words engraved on the skin permanently serve as "sign vehicles" (Kosut, 2000, p. 79), conveying stories about an individual's past and present experiences. Given that when a tattoo is placed on the skin that is visually accessible to the public sphere, it no longer remains a private space but rather becomes a dynamic interface bridging past with the present, private with public gaze, and individual experience with social interaction. This whole process emanates through visual communication and interpretation by others, endowing tattooed bodies as an embodiment of communicative agency. However, these communicative dynamics operate on multifaceted levels, having individuals engaged in a form of communication that involves responding to the visual cues with either negative or affirmative predispositions rooted in social stereotypes and prejudices, which subsequently proceed them to interpret the meanings embedded with tattoos.

While Kosut's theory of tattoos fundamentally revolves around self-expression and communication, its theoretical thread can be extended for the analysis of the communicative potentials of a forced tattoo. The effortless visual accessibility and the "distinctive narrative quality" (Kosut, 2000, p. 82) of tattoos facilitate "non-verbal transmission" (Kosut, 2000, p. 80) and offer avenues for discursive interpretive approaches. Although the absence of self-expression and personal empathy of the tattooee still persists, forced tattoos never fail to narrativize the victimization, trauma, or coercion of the tattooee. Due to their visual competence of transmitting messages beyond verbal means, forced tattoos are interpreted by the observers as narratives of hardship, captivity, or past trauma. This interpretative performance of forced tattoos unbridles additional potential contributing to impactful communications that are necessary to understand the overall story of the tattooed individual. Fenske (2007) emphasizes the visual performance of the tattooed body that transmits meanings and messages subjective to discursive interpretations depending upon the observers' experiences, cultural backgrounds, and individual traits (p. 80). Therefore, these theoretical strings of visual performance, communication, and interpretation can be applied to expand tattoo theories beyond one-dimensional symbolic references, as is usually offered in the literature. Joyce Carol Oates' creative deployment of tattoos in her fiction *The Tattooed Girl* (2006) emphasizes that a tattooed body is neither solely private property nor a static

social canvas but a communicative one. Oates' praxiological conduct reflects on the visual potency of women's tattoos, turning the skin into a gateway to amplify the voices of marginalized tattooed women in literature. Subject to perpetual social interactions and interpretations, particularly by men, tattoos perform a role in (re)creating, interpreting, and ultimately transforming one's existing individual identity.

WHITE TRASH, DOUBLE-LAYERED MARGINALIZATION AND TATTOOED SKIN

Renowned for her pioneering authorship in depicting the challenges faced by beleaguered women in American society, Joyce Carol Oates astutely opts for a female protagonist who hails from the "white trash" community in order to debunk "the constructed nature of whiteness and femininity" (Horeck, 2010, p. 26) as often portrayed in fiction. Often pejoratively referred to, the term "white trash" first emerged in the early colonial era, gaining prominence during the antebellum period to describe the impoverished, socially disadvantaged white working-class populace, often burdened with labels such as cultural misfit or even amoral criminals (Isenberg, 2017). Some popular stereotypes about "white trash" depict them as carriers of diseases, engaged in petty crimes, and involved in activities such as unconventional body tattooing, presenting them as a perceived cultural nuisance to society. Sweeney (2001) explains that the term "white trash" is linked to a prejudice concerning their "inherited attribute" (p. 143), where the belief suggests that committing "homicide is somehow innate and natural" (p. 143) for individuals within the community. They not only endure subordination to mainstream society but also within their own community, thereby undergoing a dual-layered subjugation characterized by an "aesthetic of ultimate marginalization" (Sweeney, 2001, pp. 143-44). In the present context, this stereotypical practice of discriminating against "white trash" by mainstream society and the community itself directly intersects with Alma Busch's tattoos due to its "symbolic associations with marginalized groups and subcultures" (Kosut, 2015, p. 34). Jet, Joshua's sister, is the representative of the mainstream, and Dmitri, the representative of the same community as Alma, actively takes part in double-layered marginalization. As a tenacious twenty-seven-year-old daughter of an impoverished coal miner, Alma's life encounters a transformative twist when she finds herself tattooed after regaining consciousness in a detention camp in Pittsburgh.

The depiction of Alma's tattoos, from the very beginning of the novel, induces a visual significance that actively solicits attention. The tattoos on her skin spread like "filigree of magenta and dull red" (Oates, 2006, p. 26). Embroidering from her arms, the back of her hands, and across her wrists conveys calligraphy, evoking imagery reminiscent of a dried bloodbath. Even though the tattoos are not as "vivid or emphatic" (p. 26) in shape, they emanate a semblance of "a miniature language" (p. 26), which invites a form of communication representing a hidden or deeply personal narrative beckoning decryption. Kosut (2000) explains, "Tattoos are visual phenomena that often evoke powerful responses—ranging from curiosity and admiration to disgust and fear" (p. 82). It is Dmitri who is drawn to her tattoos, which serve as visual stimuli, leaving a profound impact on his reaction. As he examines the tattoos, a preponderance of acute curiosity grips Dmitri, making him irresistibly driven to interpret their meaning. "He wanted to talk more about tattoos. Who'd perpetrated them upon her?" (Oates, 2006, p. 29). Dmitri expeditiously undertakes an examination of the potential antecedents associated with Alma's tattoos, ultimately postulating a plausible correlation with her period of incarceration in the Pittsburgh police station. Dmitri, upon discerning the symbology of Alma's tattoos, comments, "If you are the Tattooed Girl, you must be without shame" (p. 29), suggesting a potential association with fugitive tattoos. His statement prompts

critical reflection on the institutional process of meaning-making that dictates tattooed individuals as a branded identity from prison (Rozycki Lozano et al; Fenske, 2007). Also, the metaphorical descriptions of Alma's tattoos as "crude" (p. 30), resembling "cobwebs sticking to her skin" (p. 30) and akin to "graffiti" (p. 30) or "drunken speech" (p. 30) evoke powerful implications, suggesting a sense of disorder, chaos, or perhaps a lack of intentionality in the formation of the tattoos. In the white trash tattoo community, it is not an infrequent occurrence for the quality of tattoos to be compromised owing to a deficiency in tattooing expertise (DeMello, 2000, p. 6). The tattoos become marks of difference, exhibiting class differences where the tattooed, marginalized bodies of women are transformed into sites of evidence—an idea Oates adeptly emphasizes to underscore the power dynamics within the "white trash" community (Hlavka & Mulla, 2021)). Alma's former lover, Dmitri, a "brooding, egoistic, and controlling" (pp. 28-29) individual, identifies himself with the upper-class "White Trash". Having defeated poverty, he secures a stable job at one of Mount Carmel's premier cafés, presenting himself as a proud individual who has successfully elevated his status from the derogatory label of "white trash" and setting himself apart from Alma within the community. What differentiates between "*White Trash*" and "white trash", except the upper-case letters, is the "tradition and pride" (Hartigan, 1997, p. 327), which eventually dissolves into the double-layered stereotyping and two-fold marginalization that retain the additional class segregation quite significantly between the people even from the same community. Apart from the tattoo stereotype, Dmitri compares Alma with a "flotsam" (Oates, 2006, p. 27) while discerning her as an abandoned and social waste lacking individual merit and sensibility to start a career at Mount Carmel. He derives his "authority through violence, in an attempt to fight back poverty" (Wang, 2018a, p. 136) in an attempt to be progressive in his life and tries to overpower Alma by violating Alma's tattooed body sexually. The "crude, clumsy tattoos" (Oates, 2006, p. 96) on Alma's face become a catalyst for Dmitri's sexual charge as the tattoos "receive male erotic projections, to lascivious, immoral, and impure forms of sex" (Botz-Bornstein, 2013, p. 240). Alma is occasionally perceived as a "human punching bag" by Dmitri for his sadistic pleasure of sexual dominance and subordination (Oates, 2006, p. 63). The dominative power enabling him to achieve and control Alma's body stems from his hierarchical social position infused with the tattoo-fetishistic stereotype, which Dmitri effectively utilizes to establish an authoritative space between them. This underscores an intra-class distinction within their shared "white trash" community, emphasizing that despite their shared socioeconomic background, they are not entirely alike.

In addition to this intra-class subjugation, Alma deals with profound marginalization within the broader societal framework, epitomized by the character Jet Seigl. From their initial encounter, Jet's disdain for Alma's tattoos results in Alma's exclusion from the mainstream, as Jet proclaims that tattoos are exclusively affiliated with "marginalized populations" (Fenske, 2007). Continuing to subject Alma to denigration, Jet brands Alma's tattoos as "ugly", "despoiled", and "grotesque", aligning them with sub-cultural and anti-social activities such as stealing, obtrusion (Kosut, 2000, p. 85; Oates, 2006, pp. 74-125). Jet's anguish surfaces periodically as she blames Alma for encroaching upon the Seigl family with the alleged intent of coveting their wealth. Alma is accused of pocketing Joshua's *Aeneid* translations and pilfering her mother's cherished jewelry which was originally a gift from Joshua. Such events reinforce the practised stereotype and the criminalization of Alma's identity driven by the tattoo stereotype. Jet's hostility continues to accumulate until it escalates to physical violence, and finally, towards the end of the novel, Jet presumes Joshua's unfortunate death, a fall off the cliff, to be a deliberate act of homicide by Alma. DeMello (2007) underscores the societal implications of *prison tattoos*, emphasizing that "wearing prison tattoos

marks one as being part of a specific social network that is on the fringe of mainstream society. For prison tattoos, that mark is especially stigmatizing" (Oates, 2006, p. 69). Alma characterized as "white trash" with tattoos, deemed suspicious to Jet, undergoes biased scrutiny akin to that faced by a criminal. Supervising Joshua's case, both Jet and the investigative officers harbour suspicions that Alma might be Joshua's assassin due to the visible tattoos on her face—a permanent "Tear" emblematic of a convict's imprisonment, particularly for committing murder (DeMello, 2007, p. 69). This visible face-tattoo thus serves as powerful sign vehicles symbolizing not only incarceration but also the endured suffering within the prison system.

This narrative underscores the societal preconceptions associated with tattoos, particularly those linked to criminality, and how they contribute to the prejudiced perception of Alma as a potential perpetrator. These events underscore the exploitation of power to assert control over subordinates, revealing a stark portrayal of hierarchical authority and its manipulative tendency over the marginalized by perpetuating the institutional discourse that sets the stereotype. Jet's behaviour towards Alma exemplifies the pervasiveness of inter-racial conflicts, which stem from the inveterate practice of disgrace and prejudice. Therefore, Alma's identity reveals not only the ingrained stereotypes associated with poverty and ethnicity but also the extent to which mainstream American society has trouble embracing the marginalized. Therefore, being a "*white trash*" girl with strange tattoos, Alma is seen as vulnerable and succumbs to the very centre of the marginalization within her community. This dual-layered marginalization by Jet and Dmitri compounds her struggles as she finds herself struggling both at the cost of being victimized physically and psychologically, which only works as a catalyst in her transformative journey later on in the novel.

COMMUNICATIVE TATTOOED SKIN AND STRATEGIC SILENCE

As Kosut (2000) puts it, "Like every photograph, every tattoo has a story behind it" (p. 82). A tattoo is the repository of stories that veil as well as lay bare individual experiences, which may or may not align with the voluntary decision of the tattooee. The story attached to the tattoos unfolds through interactions with others, who are often curious to unveil and interpret the meaning behind the tattoos, seeking an opportunity to craft their own narratives. Devoid of the tattooee's intervention, especially when it is a forced one, a tattoo wields non-verbal potency, communicating as a visual narrator of the story of violence and victimization (Fisher, 2002, p. 99). In the novel, Alma's tattoos recount the harrowing tale of her incarceration in the Pittsburgh detention camp, during which she is involuntarily tattooed by some mysterious men while unconscious. This nonconsensual intrusion upon Alma's body, forcibly imprinting her skin with tattoos, epitomizes the "violent imposition of the male narrative on the female body" (Hardin, 1999, p. 98), which changes her life forever. It is only after repeated questions from Dmitri and Joshua that Alma eventually shares her dreadful story of how she was sexually assaulted and left abandoned in a secluded place with tattoos printed all over her body. Kosut (2000) and Fenske (2007) both have addressed that interpretations of tattoos can often be conflicting, taking different approaches from one another and frequently diverging from the original intention of the tattoos. In the novel, the absence of Alma's direct authority over her tattoos allows Dmitri and Joshua to dictate their own interpretations, turning the visual potency of tattoos into a narrative significance. As decoders of these visual symbols, they shape Alma's identity according to their interpretations. Their interpretations of Alma's disfigured tattoos appear with "contradictory meanings" (Oksanen &

Turtiainen, 2005, p. 112). Dmitri's envision of Alma's tattoos as "a moth with frayed wings" (Oates, 2006, p. 58) resting injured on her face parallels with Alma being an imprisoned and wounded individual, contending to establish her identity within the constraints of a patriarchal society. Drawing an analogy of Alma's imprisoned life at the prison, he adds that Alma is already defeated and vanquished like the "dead" moth on her face that "won't ever fly" (Oates, 2006, p. 58). On the contrary, Joshua's interpretation of Alma's tattoos dismisses Dmitri's pessimistic projection; he sees the tattoos as symbols of vitality and vigour, "like a gaudy brightly hued butterfly amid ordinary moths" (Oates, 2006, p. 199). Here, Joshua's interpretation of Alma's blemished tattoos validates to be an exuberant butterfly filled with a buoyant energy that appears ready to quiver into life, symbolizing a shift from the condemned self to a triumphant one.

This illustrates the idea of how the same tattoos communicate differently depending upon individual perspectives and their response to the institutional meaning-making process of tattoos, which is often devoted to stereotypical connotations (Fenske, 2007). Alma's tattoos, conveying two contradictory shades of identity, are constructed and (de)constructed by Dmitri and Joshua even when Alma does not participate in providing any metaphorical shapes to her tattoos or explaining her own versions of the significance of the tattoos. Thus, Dmitri and Joshua play pivotal roles in Alma's journey of storytelling through her tattoos−one drawn primarily to her challenging past, while the other foresees her potential for flourishing prosperity and independence. Through these contrasting perspectives of Dmitri and Joshua, Oates not only captures the marginalized "white trash" experience as a model of patriarchal subservience but also accomplishes a dual strategic move by essentializing Alma's trajectory of progression and employing her tattoos as a visual catalyst for registering and amplifying her voice in the novel.

Kosut (2000) expounds that *tattoo narratives* not only decipher how "the body and self-identity are reflexively constructed and interconnected" (p. 98) but also articulate a profound "sense of agency" (p. 98). Existing as an expressive canvas, Alma's tattoos reflect her dynamic emotional states and their corresponding responses only to mirror her inner sentiments. Throughout the novel, Alma's tattoos undergo continuous structural reformation as well: they fade and change shapes and evolve metaphorical meanings and interpretations contingent upon different times and situations (Oates, 2006, p. 214). When Alma experiences emotions such as anger or jealousy, her blemished cheek changes its colour, shifting towards a reddish or brownish hue. This alteration is akin to a pulsating manifestation of her intense inner turmoil, indicative of a form of "self-reflexivity... triggered by social interaction" (Kosut, 2000, p. 86). Subsequently, after the death of Joshua, the tattoos morph into a "lurid smudge" (Oates, 2006, p. 289), leaving her emotionally distraught and in a state of identity crisis, searching for reaffirmation and coherence. Therefore, the dynamic relationship between her emotions and the tattoos symbolizes the fluidity of her identity and "an exteriorization of the self" (Kosut, 2000, p. 90). The multifaceted nature of Alma's identity can be deciphered by examining her emotional expression through the visual narrative quality of her tattoos. This analysis suggests that the tattoos act as a metaphorical voice, communicating on her behalf and conveying her emotions and inner self without the necessity for spoken words. This silent yet expressive form of self-assertion challenges the conventional notion that vocal expression is the sole agency of communication for a literary character. Therefore, Oates strategically positions Alma to remain a silent witness to the interpretation of the tattoos as a "third alternative to speech or the silence of the symbolic" (Person, 1989, p. 470) −allowing her to buy some time and choose precisely when to share her narrative. Alma articulates this strategic silence by stating, "You learn to wait. You force yourself to be silent to give another time to speak" (Oates, 2006, p. 243). Far from signifying passivity, her silence

emerges as a calculated act of resistance, reinforcing the idea that freedom is shaped by dominative norms and an independent voice often necessitates strategic silence (Moosavinia & Yousefi, 2018). Alma's tattoos, therefore, serve as a powerful tool and a counter-narrative, transforming her violated body into a communicative medium while also creating "opportunities for the subversions of norms" (Moosavinia & Yousefi, 2018, p. 162). This bespeaks Oates' idea of adorning Alma's communicative tattoos, which not only underscore the vulnerability of a marginalized identity but also leverage her tattooed scars to transform her story into an empowering self-narrative without uttering a word. By becoming the voice stamped on her body to the social audience of both mainstream and her own community, Alma embraces the tattoos on her violated body and turns them into a communicative story.

METAMORPHOSIS OF INDIVIDUATION: TATTOOS AND TRANSFORMATIVE IDENTITY

As chronicled by Mifflin (2013), Jamie Summers, one of the pioneers in modern tattooing, characterizes tattooing as a "metamorphic rite" (p. 64), —a process that not only alters the skin but fundamentally transforms identity. This transformation embodies a journey of resilience and growth, as "the skin scabs and heals" during the tattooing process, mirroring suffering and change (DeMeola, 2018, p. 1). In this framework, tattoos stand as permanent spectators on the (re)defined body, silently witnessing the individual's transformative journey, intertwining physical, psychological, and social dimensions. Alma's emergence from a destitute victim to an economically independent and psychologically resilient individual follows a trajectory propelled by the very tattoos that were once forcefully inscribed on her. Her journey aligns closely with Jack Bauer's (2021) concept of the "transformative self", which he defines as "an enduring, subjective, largely narrative self-identity that the person uses routinely to interpret and plan one's life in the direction of personal growth" (p. 10). Alma evolves from a passive, "victimic" identity to an active, self-constructed, and agentic identity, creating her own unique "narrative identity" (Bauer, 2021, pp. 7-11). By enduring her traumatic past, including violence and forced tattooing, and refusing to follow the old pattern, Alma begins to shape a narrative that moves toward resilience and autonomy. Oates portrays Alma as a character "coming from a hard margin of a society who needs to construct a self-identity narrative" (Bauer, 2021, p. 289). Her journey toward self-dependency allows her to reclaim her individuality, transforming from the widely known "Tattooed Girl" back to her original yet redefined self and identity as Alma Busch.

The reference to the book "Symbol of Transformation" by Carl Jung in Joshua's residential library reflects Oates' contextualization of Alma's potential growth through symbols and mythology, unveiling the transformative power of human unconsciousness expressions. In Jungian explanation, these symbols offer intricate insights into the human psyche and play a crucial role in the process of individuation (DeMeola, 2018, pp. 19-20; Jung, 1971). Alma's journey, evolving from Dmitri's view of her tattoo as a "dying moth" (Oates, 2006, p. 222) to Joshua's perception as an "exotic butterfly" (Oates, 2006, p. 222), symbolizes her metamorphic transformation from victimization to vitality and self-growth. In the exploration of Alma's transformative journey, it becomes evident that Oates recurrently oscillates between referring to her as Alma Busch and "the Tattooed Girl" throughout the novel, illustrating the dual facets of Alma's identity. Oates employs the term "the Tattooed Girl" when Alma is depicted in moments of vulnerability or recollections, particularly those linked to victimization in her tumultuous past

life in Akron Valley and Pittsburgh. For instance, during the police interrogation following Joshua's tragic demise, memories of prior encounters with legal authorities inundate her thoughts, driven by the fear of getting arrested—an experience that once made her a victim of social stigma and stereotypes. This revives her past trauma rooted in the challenges of social marginalization while resurfacing her vulnerability and the haunting sense of stigmatization. In the novel, "she'd wake up sometimes not the Tattooed Girl but Alma…The Tattooed Girl was basically sweet female meat that could barely utter a coherent sentence…but Alma was different; Alma could look straight at you and see you" (Oates, 2006, p. 62). The persona of the "Tattooed Girl" represents a more vulnerable, docile, passive and objectified identity, indicative of her lack of effective communication. In contrast, "Alma" emerges as a distinct and assertive persona, embodying a more insistent and self-valued personality that confirms her gradual 'growth and self-narration of agency. Oates' deliberate alternation between these two personas, with one gradually eclipsing the other in the course of the novel, signifies the depiction of Alma's transformative evolution. As she moves from passive suffering to active self-authorship of her own decisions, she begins to reinterpret and (re)assess her prejudiced notions. Eventually, she learns that her long-held prejudices and resentments against Joshua, grounded on her belief that he was responsible for shutting down the mines in her village, leading to migration, displacement and overall making people miserable, were speculative and groundless (Oates, 2006, p. 259). This revelation challenges Alma to reevaluate her judgment of Joshua and reassess her relationship with him. Acknowledging her own fallibility, Alma experiences a profound sense of guilt, symbolized by "the mark on her cheek pulsed like an infection" (Oates, 2006, p. 259), indicative of the contagion of misinformation spread by Dmitri, who had painted Joshua as an opportunistic and condemnable Jew. This pivotal moment marks a distinct identity shift for Alma, symbolizing a departure from the vulnerable and indecisive "Tattooed Girl" and constituting a restorative moment for her individuation as she attempts to construct a narrative identity and cultivate personal growth (Bauer, 2021, pp. 9-10). Hence, she "reclaims" (Oates, 2006, p. 275) her identity as a flourished individual rather than remaining subject to Dmitri's influence. Alma's emphatic refusal to reunite with Dmitri voiced not once but twice, signifies a self-regulating transition, highlighting her burgeoning autonomy and asserting her transformative agency valiantly.

CONCLUSION

In summation, the present study shows how Alma's forcibly inscribed tattoos communicatively constitute a narrative of resilience, transformation and self-authorship. The textual analysis of the novel reveals Oates' critique of the dual-layered marginalization inflicted upon Alma by both Jet and Dmitri, subjecting her to physical as well as psychological victimization within the pervasive framework of social and racial hierarchies prevalent in both mainstream society and her own community. Despite intensifying her pain and struggle, these challenges foster resilience, propelling her to strategically embrace silence and self-narrate her destiny by reinterpreting and reassessing her flaws. While her tattoos are imposed without her consent, Alma reconfigures their significance, turning them into communicative conduits in her evolving journey of identity and autonomy. As Branaman (2019) asserts, "Identity [is] a central issue for feminism" (p. 46) and deals with the "social and personal transformation" (p. 49) of women globally. Alma's transformation in this study, therefore, resonates with core feminist goals that "challenge [to] the hegemony of the modern, western and masculine ideal" (Branaman, 2019, p. 49), narrativizing her

journey from a victimized, submissive, prejudiced, and overwhelmed self to a flourishing individual marked by endurance, resilience and reclaimed selfhood. This study thus contributes to the discourses of forced tattoos in literature as narrative conduits of resistance and transformation, reverberating with feminist themes of identity, autonomy and resilience. However, it also recognizes that feminine narratives of resilience remain incomplete without addressing the intertwined experience of silence, subjugation, and dominance, which are deeply embedded in the broader discourse of feminist identity, body politics, and subversion. The study invites further exploration into the intersection of body inscriptions, memory, ethics, and culture as a potential area for future research in literary studies and beyond.

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