

“To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal”: A Study of the Plight of the Afro-American Female Slaves in Morrison’s *A Mercy*

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Abstract

Racism made its foray into America as early as the 16th century, and it is still found in the texture of American culture and society. It still continues to assume multifarious forms of racial animosity and racial inequality in the 21st century. Enduring centuries of slavery, physical exploitation, and social disparity, Afro-Americans have long been vulnerable to physical violence in the racially-charged America. The historical novel *A Mercy* (2008) by noted Afro-American writer and Nobel laureate Toni Morrison (1931-2019) revolves around the historical milieu and events of 17th century America. In the early phase of colonialism in America, Afro-Americans were victims of various types of human bondage, from chattel slavery to indentured servitude.

The present paper aims to depict, from the point of view of Black Feminism, how the female slaves in this novel are exploited—sexually, economically, and politically. It focuses on how they try to warn the younger slaves about slavery by sharing their personal trauma. Motherhood is widely believed to be an essential issue of feminism. This paper attempts to show the psychology of ‘mothering’ in a world circumscribed by racial oppression, and the strategies a black slave-mother adopts for her survival and also to safeguard her children. It investigates why Florens, the protagonist of the novel, ultimately feels the urge to document her excruciating life-story by etching on the wooden walls in one of her master’s rooms.

Keywords: *racism; chattel; indentured; trauma; Black Feminism; mothering*

At the time of its publication, the publisher of Toni Morrison (1931-2019) advertised *A Mercy* (2008) as a sequel to Morrison’s critically-acclaimed and Pulitzer prize-winning novel *Beloved* (1987). Both books cover the themes of “mothering” and the difficult ethical choices that black female slaves must make under the yoke of slavery in such societies based on slave labour and gender discrimination. Both novels deal with many complex and enduring themes such as black Americans’ bitter terms with slavery, the quest for self, individual identity, cultural identity, notion of family, motherhood, and a community building.

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Morrison treats these themes with such veracity that her novels achieve universality, defying spatio-temporal strictures. The gender bias inherent in all patriarchal societies leads to the devaluation of all women, irrespective of class and race. However, the experience of African-American women is uniquely different, and excruciating. They are ‘doubly’ marginalized—both for being woman and for being black. If we extend the application of Antonio Gramsci’s term ‘subaltern’, Afro-American women can be called ‘coloured’ and ‘gendered’ subalterns simultaneously.

The commodification of black females is a crucial aspect in *A Mercy*. Florens’s mother sells her to Jacob under duress; Lina is sold to Jacob by the Presbyterians who rescued her; and Sorrow is sold to Jacob by the sawyer. Though Jacob initially detests the trading of slaves, he ultimately falls prey to its lucre. As farming does not give him the desired profit, he invests in a sugarcane plantation in Barbados. With the sweat of the black slaves, he makes huge money and builds a huge palatial house like D’Ortega in order to satisfy his ego. Labourers (including the indentured ones from the next farm over, Willard and Scully) from all over the neighbouring regions come to help setting the dream project up.

Black Feminism centres on the trauma that the black women exclusively experienced, deciphering their stance vis à vis race, class, sex and other socio-political identities. Black women have long been intentionally excluded from the critical discourses of mainstream feminism (often called ‘white feminism’) due to racial factor, while concurrently being marginalised from various black liberation movements solely because of their gender. Black liberation struggle ought to be revisited so that it will address the collective plight of black people rather than equating it with maleness (hooks, 1984). Bell hooks believes that black women in America often face systematic barriers that limit their opportunities. However, she also posits that marginality can emerge as a site of possibility and a space of resistance. She laments that “A mark of their victimization is that they accept their lot in life without visible question, without organized protest, without collective anger or rage” (hooks 1). Hook believes that sole purpose of feminism is to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression, benefitting all women, irrespective of group, race, or class: “Feminism is the struggle to end sexist oppression. Its aim is not to benefit solely any specific group of women, any particular race or class of

women...Most importantly, feminism is neither a lifestyle nor a ready-made identity or role one can step into” (hooks 26).

Black feminism addresses the many facets of identity that “coloured” women cling to, which is extremely significant as it provides a platform for discussing the harrowing experiences of being black and the exclusion from mainstream critical discourses due to gender inequality. American sociologist Patricia Hill Collins suggests that African American women can contribute something unique to feminist scholarship. Collins calls for inclusive scholarship that rejects knowledge dehumanizing and objectifying people. Anneeka Marshall writes in the article “From sexual denigration to self-respect: resisting images of Black female sexuality” (1996) that “During slavery the belief that Africans were subhuman savages with uncontrollable sexual capacities was used to legitimate the exploitation of their labour” (Marshall 5). Since the inception of slavery, black Afro-American women were thought to be hyper-sexual and were relegation to the status of ‘sensuous’ slaves. This covertly legitimized their rape or molestation by ‘white’ men. For the white exploiters, the term ‘blackness’ stood for filthiness, ugliness, baseness, sin, and evil. On the other hand, ‘whiteness’ connoted purity, virtue, beauty, and goodness. Collins feels an urgency to erase the negative images of black womanhood: “Self-definitions of Black womanhood were designed to resist the negative controlling images of Black womanhood advanced by Whites as well as the discriminatory social practices that these controlling images supported” (Collins 10).

Collins, in her book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990), proposes a form of standpoint theory that emphasizes the perspective of African American women. Collins argues that the interlocking system of race, gender, class oppression, and privilege has given African American women a distinctive point of view from which we should make a genuine attempt to understand their marginalized status: “Black feminist thought can create a collective identity among African-American women about the dimensions of a Black women's standpoint. Through the process of rearticulation, Black feminist thought can offer African-American women a different view of ourselves and our worlds...More important, this rearticulated consciousness aims to empower African-American women and stimulate resistance” (Collins 32).

Not only were black female slaves victims of sexual violence, but white women also were victims of domestic violence: “Wife beating was common, she knew, but the restrictions—not after nine at night, with cause and not anger—were for wives and only wives” (Morrison 95). Morrison shows how the then-colonial society normalized domestic violence against women. Moreover, society offered no legal protections for spinsters, as shown by Rebekka’s description of Lina’s traumatic past. Lina had been undergoing a huge traumatic phase when she was tortured and ravished by a lover, leaving her perennially distorted. In her book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984), bell hooks observes, “Feminism is the struggle to end sexist oppression. Therefore, it is necessarily a struggle to eradicate the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels, as well as a commitment to reorganizing society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and material desires” (hooks 24).

In this novel, the female slave Sorrow becomes pregnant twice at Jacob’s Farm. But in both cases, the father is unknown. Actually, black female slaves were easy prey to sexual exploitation by both ‘whites’ and black males. According to the famous American novelist and social activist Alice Walker, “For centuries the black woman has served as the primary pornographic “outlet” for white men in Europe and America. We need only think of the black women used as breeders, raped for the pleasure and profit of their owners. We need only think of the license the “master” of the slave women enjoyed” (Walker 42). Florens’s mother is gang-raped at the command of the rapacious Portuguese slave dealer D’Ortega in Maryland. She gives birth to two children—a daughter named Florens and a boy. In this case too, the fathers are unknown. In a disembodied form, Florens’s mother narrates (addressed to her absent daughter Florens) towards the end of the novel: “I don’t know who is your father. It was too dark to see any of them...They said they were told to break we in. There is no protection. To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below” (Morrison 163).

A group of dissolute men is sent by the master D’Ortega to gang-rape Florens’s mother. This rape is described by the expression “break her in”. The expression suggests an extreme degree of violence inflicted upon her because of her socially low position as a black slave. Later she is also sexually exploited by her master D’Ortega. Raping an Afro-American slave woman

might carry two implications—firstly sexual gratification of the master, and secondly forcing her to give birth to children to perpetuate slavery. From this angle, the labour of black female slaves is seen as ‘reproductive labour’ by the masters, in contrast to the ‘productive labour’ of the master class which results in the production of goods that have monetary value in the capitalist set-up. The scars (both physical and psychological) of Florens’s mother bear witness to the wrenching pain she underwent. However, she is unable to decide whether to heal the wounds or to face the festering further.

The deep social rift between the masters and the slaves is also evident in this novel. The slaves are not supposed to wear shoes. Since her childhood, Florens had a deep obsession for shoes while working on the farm along with her mother. There, she would put on her master’s thrown-away shoes. Wearing these would make her feel more like a lady and less like a slave. The shoes are used here as a metaphor for wealth and higher class as it becomes evident that only the rich can afford to buy new shoes. Lina brings her back to the harsh reality by remarking, “Who else these days has the hands of a slave and the feet of a Portuguese lady?” (Morrison 4). The irony of slavery is that the “coloured” slaves are relatively safe at the hands of their master/mistress. Without their master/mistress, they will be easy prey to any white man. Lina, Sorrow, and Florens realize this very fact. The African women were always perceived as sexually potent. That’s why they are apprehensive about the phase after their mistress’ death: “three unmastered women ... out here, alone, belonging to no one, became wild game for anyone” (Morrison 68). The noted American poet and feminist Adrienne Rich observes in her path-breaking book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976) that if a woman thinks of succouring freedom, she should at first disburden the body of a woman but it is impossible: “The body has been made so problematic for women that it has often seemed easier to shrug it off and travel as a disembodied spirit” (Rich 40).

The white European put a negative impact on both the African slaves and the Native Americans. The Africans were manipulated to be slaves and unconditionally obey their masters irrespective of the circumstances. On the flip side, the Natives were affected by the contagious diseases carried into the New World by the Europeans. These diseases wiped out entire tribes of the Natives and caused a lot of immitigable pain. We find in the novel that the people of the community of Lina have been decimated by a plague. The novel implicates Africans in the slave

trade. Florens's mother was grabbed by the rival tribesmen and sent to Barbados. She observes, "I think men thrive on insults over cattle, women, water, crops" (Morrison 163).

From the start of the 16th century to the "year of abolition of slavery" (1865), slaves were brought from Africa to America, tied with shackles. According to a report, "Between 1525 and 1866, 12.5 million people were kidnapped from Africa and sent to the Americas through the transatlantic slave trade" (*Smithsonian magazine*, 4 June 2020: n. p.). In order to capture the late 17th century volatile atmosphere of racial tensions, Morrison specifically alludes to Bacon's Rebellion (1676-77), fought by slaves and indentured labourers against the repressive regime of William Berkeley, the Governor of Virginia. The rebellion was spearheaded by colonist Nathaniel Bacon, who "defied Berkeley's attempts at brokering peace between the settlers and the Native tribes" ("Bacon's Rebellion", n. p.). Post Bacon's death, the rebellion was ultimately quelled. However, the 'black' slaves and 'white' indentured servants collaborated to achieve the same goal. This created panic among rich Virginian landowners, because it showed the unified and insurgent power of lower class.

After Bacon's Rebellion (1676), the government of Virginia enacted a series of laws known as the "Virginia Slave Codes of 1705", plummeting the basic rights of the "coloured" slaves in the Virginia State. The legal code increasingly relegated slaves to an inferior position and by doing so emphasized their position as commodity rather than human beings. Historians say that these discriminating laws encouraged racism and sharpened racial divisions. The lawmakers had to do this they did not want the cementing of bond among the lower class across racial lines that posed huge threat to the white landlords in 1676. Morrison's novel *A Mercy* takes place during the budding stages of the slave trade post Bacon's Rebellion, as racial divisions began to get stiffened up.

A Mercy can be called a novel of experience as well as of ideas. The clarity and directness of these characters' message make the novel so engaging to the reader. No one perhaps heard these authentic voices that were made silent first by cruel nature of society and then by taciturn historical documents. Morrison's novel lends voice to a range of female characters: Rebekka, Lina, Florens, and Sorrow. These characters alternately narrate their stories, and their choked voices betoken the physical and psychological scars of their respective lives. Through the gripping first person narratives of Florens and Florens's mother, and other third person limited

narratives, Morrison depicts the immense plight and irreparable damages done to the 'coloured' slaves, especially female slaves. The coerced incorporation of African-American women into chattel slavery means that "West African women became economically exploited, politically powerless units of labor" (Collins 50).

A Mercy is an intricately woven narrative that takes the reader right to the genesis of America. It is a place where black slaves are forced to make wrenching decisions. At that time (the late 17th century), the venomous seeds of the race, religion, and class had already been sown on the land of America. They would later come to fruition in the form of American Civil War (1861-65). In her earlier novel *Beloved*, Morrison arrestingly describes Sethe's desperation to take the lives of her own children. Sethe succeeds in snatching the life of the baby girl, the "Beloved" of the story. She defends herself by saying that she killed her in order to keep her safe from the clutches of the schoolteacher and a life of cruel slavery. This kind of black infanticides can be deemed as "acts of resistance" (Hine and Wittenstein, 1981). In this novel, when Florens is an adolescent, her mother hands her over to Jacob—a farmer and trader to save her from a life of sexual exploitation at the dirty hands of the Portuguese D'Ortega who deals in slaves. The "mercy" of the novel's title comes from this adoption of Florens by Jacob.

The events from both the novels attest the horror of slavery. The black slave mothers have to make painful decisions under the duress of dehumanizing slavery. The fact that they could be so desperate to ensure the safety of their loved ones from the tentacles of slavery is a burning proof to the cruelty of slavery. Judith Herman thinks that traumatic events are un-utterable and unthinkable. In her ground-breaking study, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence – from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (1992), Herman describes how the dialectic of trauma works: "The dialectic of trauma gives rise to complicated, sometimes uncanny alterations of consciousness [...] It results in the protean, dramatic, and often bizarre symptoms of hysteria which Freud recognized a century ago as disguised communications about sexual abuse in childhood" (Herman 1-2). Getting estranged from her mother, Florens becomes all alone in the racially-charged milieu. Under a new master, she has to go on her own. According to political theorist Hannah Arendt, "What has been lost is the continuity of the past...What you then are left with is still the past, but a *fragmented past*, which has lost its certainty of evaluation" (Arendt 1994).

According to dictionary definition, ‘chattel slavery’ is the system of enslaving and owning of human beings and their offsprings as property, and forcing them to work even without wages. In this system, the child will have to undergo duress in servile condition like the mother: “This foundational law of slavery designated a perverse matrilineal construct based on powerlessness, the manifest aim of which was to insure the perpetuation of an enslaved race from the wombs of Black women” (Pillow 3). On the other hand, ‘indentured labour’ is a system of contractual labour that the farm owners and plantation owners used posts the repealment of slavery in the U. S. by the Congress in 1865.

Lina, the surrogate mother of Florens and a slave at Jacob’s home tells Florens with stoic acceptance, “We never shape the world...The world shapes us” (Morrison 83). Biological mothers are supposed to take care of their children in an unconditional way but as Rosalie Riegle Troester observes in her article “Turbulence and Tenderness: Mothers, Daughters, and ‘Othermothers’” (1984), African and African-American communities have come to the realization that entrusting one person with the sole onus for nurturing a child may not be always wise or possible, therefore the need for ‘othermother’ arises: “As a result, othermothers—women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities—traditionally have been central to the institution of Black motherhood” (Troester 178). In this sense, Lina can be said to be the ‘othermother’ of Florens. Rebekka comes to the sad realization that despite being a white woman, her hopes are circumscribed to “servant, prostitute, wife, and although horrible stories were told about each of those careers, the last one seemed safest” (Morrison 91).

In this novel, some of the characters are unnamed. It’s nothing new in Morrison’s oeuvre. For example, in her famous novel *Beloved*, we find that the murdered daughter of Sethe is referred to as ‘Beloved’ throughout. In *A Mercy*, the girl who is rescued from a ship by a sawyer is named Sorrow. Denial of any proper name is stripping oneself of one’s identity. While the sawyer sells Sorrow off to Jacob, he tells Jacob, “Don’t mind her name ...You can name her anything you want. My wife calls her Sorrow because she was abandoned. She is a bit mongrelized as you can see” (Morrison 120). So, we find a total erasure of her identity. Later in the novel Sorrow calls herself ‘Complete’ as she finds a sense of completeness by giving birth to a healthy baby by an unknown parent. Florens’s mother also is anonymous in this novel. It is Morrison’s effective narrative strategy.

After the fallout with her lover (a free black man who is referred to as the Blacksmith), Florens returns to her previous farm in Virginia. There every night she takes out some time and surreptitiously enters a room and carves the narrative of her life in words (with her nails) into the wooden walls. As she knew that historical records would ignore their narratives, she writes her personal narratives. Writing gives her a kind of solace and power. It is a kind of true resistance for Florens: “True resistance begins with people confronting pain... and wanting to do something to change it” (hooks 215). In their last scene together, the blacksmith rejects Florens for nurturing the soul of a slave: “Own yourself, woman” (Morrison 141). Florens finally becomes independent. Her only compensation is that she garners some courage to write her own story for the posterity to know as “Suppressing the knowledge produced by any oppressed group makes it easier for dominant groups to rule because the seeming absence of dissent suggests that subordinate groups willingly collaborate in their own victimization” (Collins 3).

Even though Florens attempts to document her life history, other characters fail to pluck up the courage to do so, or being unlettered, are unable to do so. The black female slaves cannot easily escape their fate. In colonial America, they are put in chains under the dehumanizing system of slavery. Their dream of becoming unfettered one day remains a dream. Florens’s mother narrates towards the end of the novel, “I was negrita. Everything. Language, dress, gods, dance, habits, decoration, song—all of it cooked together in the color of my skin” (Morrison 165). When Florens’s mother entrusts her eight-year-old Florence to Jacob, this apparently unmotherly but brave act offers a powerful tool for resisting oppression. But for the Afro-American female slaves it is very difficult to recuperate from the deep wounds of merciless slavery, coupled with other inflictions and exploitations.

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