



Research Paper

Motherhood and Slavery in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*: A Prequel to *Beloved*

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ABSTRACT: Most critics refer to *A Mercy* as a prequel to Morrison's most discussed novel *Beloved*. Although *A Mercy* did not go far like the *Beloved* to win Pulitzer Prize but was one of the best sellers in 2008, the year it got published. After writing a thought-provoking and critically acclaimed work, *Beloved*, Morrison goes back to the ravages of Slavery and its consequences on the mother-daughter relationship in *A Mercy*. The author revisits the similar themes of *Beloved* in *A Mercy* as an attempt to revise if those issues still have significance in the present-day African American community as it was at the time of publishing of *Beloved*. The conclusion of both stories is different, but the questions are raised against the same systems that perpetuate inequality, racism, sexism, and loss of identity. The issue of the mother-child relationship, the horrifying past of Slavery, the female body as a site of oppression, the search for self and identity, and the idea of home are central to the plot of *A Mercy*. In African American narratives, authors take examples from major historical events of Slavery, migration, and assimilation and try to fictionalize them so that it is traceable to the African American lineage comprising the predominantly African American literary canon.

KEYWORDS: African American Motherhood, Slavery, Memory, Social Identity, Power Dynamics

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I. INTRODUCTION

For black writers, along with Morrison, "memory" is a psychological journey back to their ancestors' past associated with the trans-Atlantic journey, which helps them revisit the harm done to the black population because of the forced migration. Along with memory, mother-line is an essential source of their past which is lost and is outside the reach of patriarchal, capitalist, and western constructs.

Although both *Beloved* and *A Mercy* take place in a period of Slavery, *A Mercy* is set in the late seventeenth century. She explores the founding period of an American society rooted in a capitalistic system of oppression, encompassing not only Black but European and Native victims as well. (Montgomery 85)

Hortense Spillers, a black literary critic, observes the black literary and cultural production, saying that the Trans-Atlantic journey of the mass population of blacks is central to its development and the only way to find the lost identity of the black self is to give primacy to feminine. The plot of *A Mercy* revolves around family in which the weak or broken mother-daughter bond is portrayed. Here, similar to her other novels, the female self attempts to redefine her identity without ancestral inheritance. The plot moves from the selling of Florens, the daughter of a slave woman, as a form of debt to a plantation owner Jacob who does not willingly purchase the slave girl but on insistence from the mother of her girl. It is the mother, the slave woman on the plantation, who begs Jacobs to take her daughter so that she will be saved from the seduction of the farm owner on which the mother works.

Valerie Babb notes that in *A Mercy*, "We can conceive of Morrison as a founding mother, proffering the mercy of correcting a flawed historical record, engaging the past to go beyond it" (195). In this novel, Morrison tries to bridge the gap between mother and daughter in linguistic, literary, psychological, and geographic terms. The narrative voice of the novel's characters depicts a complex lineage of the ancient people of America's initial years of beginning. As Valerie Babb notes, all the women in the novel are acquired by transactions: "Vaark buys Lina; Rebekka becomes his wife through his funding an arranged marriage; Vaark acquires Florens in settlement of a debt; Vaark receives Sorrow free of charge in order to remove her from the sons of a local sawyer." (156)

In her fiction, Morrison asserts that there is no singularly constituted past but a multi-dimensional heritage that cannot be quickly recovered. Similar to *Beloved*, where Sethe's lyrical tone of voice is traceable to her African mother, Nan, the character of Florens also has a poetic voice that her African mother influences. While searching for her lover, the blacksmith, Florens's voice is symbolic of American Indian culture, which she inherited from Lina, her surrogate mother. Memory has a significant part to play in her character development, which is implicated by her psychological journey of going back to the time when her mother let her go with Jacobs, her scorn for the little boy Malaik, and her writing of inscriptions on the wall of the Jacobs abandoned house on which she writes her life's story. Her voice is represented both in oral and written form.

A Mercy represents the power dynamics involved in the Slavery of African Americans and its haunting effects on the following generations of the black population. It also echoes the contemporary American practice of consumer capitalism, imperialism, and heterosexuality. The middle passage is presented as a site of "memory" to seek solutions to varied social problems by erasing national boundaries. This novel was published at a time when Morrison, as an author, was exploring her political consciousness and her fictional temporality and simultaneously expanding her boundaries, making her fictional word multi-dimensional and layered.

Critics such as John Updike and Lenora Todaro accuse *A Mercy* of a downbeat ending. However, Waegner finds unidentified optimism in the novel. He says that Morrison intentionally leaves her characters and their problems unsettled and unresolved, neither strictly optimistic nor pessimism, but leaving readers to review and rethink the questions of Slavery from which the novel starts.

Mother-Love under Slavery in *A Mercy*

Morrison designs the narrative structure of *A Mercy* to depict the formal and literary separation of mother and daughter. The initial chapter explains the separation of Florens from her mother, which Florens narrates as her traumatic memory where her mother pleads with Jacob Vaark to buy her daughter. The novel's closing chapter unfolds the reason and explains the actions of Florens's mother. It reveals that the mother wanted to protect her daughter Florens from the temptations of her plantation owner, which resulted in letting her child go away with Jacob Vaark, who she thought was a God-fearing person and did not participate in the Slave trade. She thought Jacob would protect her daughter from the lustful eyes of the men around her daughter.

The contradictory action of the slave mother is highlighted in the novel, as mothers are committed to protecting and preserving their children. However, the slave mother has no power to protect and preserve her daughter. She gives the dominion of preservation of her daughter to Jacob, who is a noble white man, and her "one chance" to protect and preserve her daughter was to beg Jacob Vaark to take her as partial payment of D'Ortega's (the plantation owner) debt to him (166). However, the mother's explanation never reaches the daughter because both mother and daughter's lives are bound to their respective plantations in two different states. Florens lives her life loathing herself as an unwanted child whose little brother was chosen over her.

The narration tries to bridge the gap between mother and daughter. However, the mother's explanation is outside the novel's frame, where the daughter has already reached a painful conclusion that she was the unwanted child for her mother and hence left abandoned. The desperate message of the mother is put in words by Morrison when the mother says, "staying on my knees...In the dust where my heart will remain each night and every day until you understand what I know and long to tell you" (167). To readers, it is evident that both will never see each other. Florens cannot understand her mother's last words, which haunt her for the rest of her life, "Take the girl" (7). By the novel's end, both mother and daughter are in desperate need of each other; Florens need her mother's words which never reach her, and her mother's desperation to get the message to her daughter. Nevertheless, communication is never channelized and remains frozen in a literary vacuum. In the novel, mother and daughter are also given textual separation by the intervening pages between the opening and closing chapters.

Laplanche explains the grounds on which the misunderstanding between mother and daughter occurs. In the normative process, parents have to take into consideration of sexual factors which the child is incapable of understanding because of his/her ignorance of adult sexuality. A child-like Florens tries to decode the meaning of her mother's words but only partially, but the other half of the meaning, which is left coded, is never grasped by her. Florens inhabits not just a world of adult sexual meanings but a plantation world of slaveholders permeated by sexuality, rife with what Jacob Vaark calls "the sweetish rot of vice" (28).

According to the concept explained by Laplanche, it is the sexual dimension hidden in the mother's speech that disturbs Florens because she is unable to grasp its meaning. Her mother, however, knows that "to be female in this place" is to be perpetually violated (163). The mother seeks hope in Jacob Vaark, who can help her daughter to escape the potential threat of rape at the plantation on which she works as an enslaved person. On the other hand, Florens cannot read the enigmatic mother's love and sacrifice concealed within her maternal dismissal, "Take the girl...my daughter" (7). It is because of Slavery that this misunderstanding takes place, which leads her and her mother to experience trauma.

Morrison shows that during Slavery, the body of enslaved people did not belong to them or their parents but to the enslaver, who could separate families according to his wishes. For Floren's mother, the only way to protect her daughter from the lust of the plantation owner is to sell her to the new master, whom she assumes is not like her present master. It can be observed that while sacrificing her Motherhood for the protection of her child mother is still unable to protect her child from Slavery; the least she can do is change her plantation owner, whom she assumes is better than her present master.

Morrison's central idea of the novel is about the unending pain inflicted upon the mother-daughter relationship, which has factual evidence from the history of America. Historian Andrew Cockburn says:

Family separation was the most onerous of all the miseries inflicted on enslaved blacks. Perpetually indebted Virginia and Maryland planters were happy to breed and sell surplus bodies, regardless of family ties (45).

Similar to migration, Slavery through sales also disrupted the African American mother-line by tarnishing the social fabric of familial bonds in the black population. As asserted by Morrison in her two novels, i.e., *Beloved* and *A Mercy*, Slavery as a legal institution and historic practice damaged the African American mother-line by refusing the Black people their history and humanity. In both the novels, set against the backdrop of Slavery, Morrison, through the characters of Beloved and Florens, tries to symbolically represent the loss and its psychological manifestation through Sethe and Mina Me (Floren's mother). In both novels, Morrison explicates the historical causes of the disruption of African American ancestral memory and mother line through the themes of migration, assimilation, and Slavery representing in fictional detail the destruction of the identity of African American heritage.

A Mercy can be examined as a small prototype of America, a small community of various ethnicities who have a history and start a new life on Jacob Vaark's farm. There is a varied group of females almost from all ethnicities, European Rebecca, Native Indian Lina, African American Florens, and a Sorrow, probably of some tribal ethnicity. However, the feminine bond is less vital in the novel. The male characters comprise Willy and Scully as white indentured, a free black man who is a blacksmith, and Jacob Vaark European gentleman, the owner of the plantation. The novel asserts that cross-cultural identities are unable to gain recognition because of how colonialism works to disrupt identifications.

Social Identity and Power Dynamics in *A Mercy*

Although this novel is written with the central theme of Slavery, it treats race in isolation. The portrayal of white indentured servants and free black man showcases class differentiation in the narrative. The multi-narrative structure of the novel tries to explore how colonialism affected the lives of women, Native Americans, and the Afro-Caribbean population. The plantation on which these people work becomes a locus for these categorical identities to narrate their part of the story and participate in the collective polyphonic protest against the hegemonic powers.

The novel's central figure is the girl child named Florens, who is separated from her mother at an early age and is in trauma because of her mother's loss. She cannot develop a relationship with the mother-like figure Lina on the plantation. This loss of maternal inheritance of Florens is symbolic of her psychic wounds. Those wounds visited upon unnamed millions of African American women and girls whose families were lost because of the slave trade in North America before abolition. The novel explores the times when African ancestry was linked to Slavery in American society. Morrison creates a power dynamic in which white indentured servants feel hostile towards the free black man as he has a higher status than the white woman on the plantation.

In a radio interview with Lynn Neary, Morrison says that at the time this novel is set, "the notion was that there was a difference between black slaves and white slaves, but there wasn't." *A Mercy* explores the causes which lead to the beginning of American racial ideology. It tries to make readers understand what events led a slave woman to give her daughter to a strange man who would keep her as an enslaved person. It is different in its positioning from *Beloved*, where readers are asked to understand the act of infanticide by Sethe. Though there is the similarity in both the novels for their subject is similar, *A Mercy* is set in 1680's America when the word "slavery" was not synonymous with people of African American descent, which makes it different from *Beloved*.

A Mercy as a novel also tries to give voice to the people of three different categories-Africans, Europeans, and Native Americans. Morrison tries to fill the void of historically silencing these marginalized sections of society, but all her novels, if written on the subject of Slavery, cannot fill the gap. She focuses on the emptiness of a large part of American history and tries to refill the void by setting her novels in times when nothing or significantly less is written. Moreover, she wants readers to examine the various ethnicities and genders of the characters, which are culturally determined.

Cathy Waegner notes that "not until the final chapter of the book" do readers recognize the mother's act of giving her daughter away as an act of Motherhood (110). Floren's mother, in the concluding chapter, recounts:

The horrors of the middle passage, slave labor on the sugar plantations of Barbados, and the sexual abuse on the tobacco plantation in Florida”, leading the readers to understand her position, which leads to "her willingness to put her daughter in the hands of a man who laughs rather than leers (93).

Morrison withholds the name of Floren's mother, who recalls her as her "minha mae," meaning "my mother" in Portuguese. It ignites a painful context of Slavery which signifies the broken bond between mother and daughter. Another aspect in which *A Mercy* is different from its predecessor novel *Beloved*, is that the conclusion of both novels is different. In *Beloved*, Sethe, after overcoming her past misery because of Slavery, visions a better future. She is independent at the novel's end, reconciling with her past and hopeful for her better future. In *A Mercy*, however, a white man is the only reason the women in the novel are connected. The plantation has no authority to look after, and the women, including Florens, Rebecca, Lina, and Sorrow, are left "unmastered" after Vaark dies (56).

In *A Mercy*, masculine control and white supremacy do not obstruct intra-feminine relationships. Despite the absence of constraints on gender, race, and class, the oppressive institutions of colonialism and Slavery are internalized by the inhabitants, especially females. The coalition between females is not developed because they all have a different past, belong to different ethnicities, and hence take time to accept each other. As said, none of the four women in the novel

could inherit; none was attached to a church or recorded in its books. Female and illegal, they would be interlopers, squatters ... subject to purchase, hire, assault, abduction, and exile ... They were orphans, each and all (56-7).

This shows that women in the early times of the pre-slavery era were vulnerable creatures without men despite them belonging to different ethnicities of white, black, and Native American. According to Cathy Waegner, the novel is set in pre-federal Maryland, where a "cross-ethnic, cross-class coalition" (103) is possible. Despite the possibility of this coalition, Morrison represents "the subsequent opportune 'divide and rule' strategy of the colonial governmental and economic leaders" and how this working further makes way for "new laws ... directed against the Africans, serving to link slavery firmly to blackness" (104).

The story of Florens is an unusual bildungsroman showing the little girl's development into a young girl knowing half-truths about her identity. But the girl, instead of maturing and developing as an independent individual, is under the constant pressure of patriarchy, white hegemony, and class dominance (Waegner 94).

Her identity is affected by her separation from her mother; she constantly replays the moment of her past life when her mother holds on to her little brother's hands and lets her go with the white man. The image of "a minha mãe leaning at the door holding her little boy's hand" haunts Florens throughout the novel. The fear of being replaced by her brother converts into fear of being replaced by all-black male children. This is the reason why Florens sees the blacksmith with the child Malaik. She tries to hurt the child because the fear of replacement is present in the love-struck Florens. She fears that the blacksmith will reject her, similar to the rejection of her mother, who chose her little brother over her. The scheme of gender privilege has left Floren's identity in a vulnerable state.

Waegner further says that "the modern female ethnic bildungsroman stresses the creation of the self-fulfilling social space by a marginalized figure who shows solidarity with the other disadvantaged women of her community" (101), but Florens experiences no such solidarity. She cannot develop any connection with her potential surrogates like Lina, Rebecca, and Sorrow because of her lost connection to the mother-line.

The intersection of various categorical differences and privileges of early American economic, racial and social, and cultural positions did not allow those women to become the surrogate to Florens. These categories of differences do not allow women to develop a bond with each other. Every woman is subjected to institutionalized oppression. However, no one among them uses their hierarchy position to help Florens as she is placed at the lowest strata, below every other woman in the novel. The highest position among these women is of Rebekka, wife of Jacob, whom her parents sent to America to marry in exchange for money. She belongs to a low-income family in a white English community. While adjusting to her new home in Maryland with people of different ethnicities, she realizes the racial differences between herself and the women on the plantation. She never tries to build a strong bond with the female community.

After the death of Jacob Vaark, Morrison places women's sexual vulnerability in the central position and focuses less on their ethnicity, race, age, immigration, and marital status. In a very subtle way, she shows how, despite the categorical differences between these women, they have equal status in their master's absence. These four women otherwise form a hierarchy among themselves. Rebekka is at the top of this social order because of being the master's lawfully wedded wife and coming of European descent. Lina comes next to Rebekka because she has served Vaark for the longest time and, in his words, is "to whom it all belonged" as she is a Native American. Sorrow is the second last on this social ladder as an expecting mother because of her age compared to Florens, who is weak, fragile, and insecure. These women claim domination and power over each other, it shows how intersecting categories of identity limit the independence of those women are openly claimed through accepting the hierarchy. This hierarchy is functional only to the extent of their master's life.

After Jacob passes away, these hierarchies have the value of which Morrison reminds us that "without the loose patriarchal structure of the patroonship 'family'" which Jacobs's masculine agency uses on these women, the coalition cannot hold.

After her husband's death, Rebekka strictly adopts the Anabaptist way of life, trying to associate with one of the religious sects by "desperately adopting the prejudicial ways of the neighboring Anabaptist community and beginning to radically restrict ... free ethnic space" and curtailing Lina's traditional practices and tries to sell off Florens which is a symbol of white privilege (Waegner 97). Through these characters, the author explains that ideas of hierarchy and privilege must be abandoned to attain equality and solidarity across socially created and preserved differences based on color, age, gender, race, ethnicity, and multiple other factors.

The novel's complex structure tries to convey its message in the concluding chapter, where Florens wants to reach out to her daughter. In the last lines, she is called "tua mae," which means "your mother," directly addressing her child Florens. The message which will never reach Florens is that "to be given dominion over another is a hard thing" (167). This is a cryptic denunciation of Slavery, which suggests that privilege, hierarchy, and domination reveal the fragility of the person who practices it on other people. The novel's characters who practice Slavery are damned because of its curse. The metaphoric representation of the evil practice of Slavery is shown by the infliction of disease first on Jacob Vaark, who is gradually consumed by his death. Later the disease is transmitted to his wife Rebekka, who also falls ill after his death and is bedridden.

Similarly, Sorrow not accepting her pregnancy is a rejection of one's dominion over the other. Lina also loses hope of potential mothering to Florens and loses any sense of cultural connection. However, Floren's love for a blacksmith represents the last act of claiming dominion over the other. After he rejects her, she kills the blacksmith to assert and claim her will on him.

She goes against her mother's last advice, which is to "wrest dominion over another," and according to her mother's narration, it is "a wrong thing" which should be condemned. Her final message tells her daughter that giving dominion is difficult. However, in certain situations, it becomes necessary, but to wrest it on oneself "is a wicked thing" (167). In the mother's narrative of the final message to her daughter, she asks for finding "alternate ways to be human together" by sharing love, kindness, and humility. This idea of being "human together" is central to the novel's agenda and a necessary component of American cross-cultural and multi-racial society.

II. CONCLUSION

The loss and disconnection of Motherhood because of the historical factors of assimilation, migration, and Slavery in American society, as portrayed by Morrison in both *A Mercy* and *Beloved*, explain that Motherhood is vital for women's empowerment. The loss of maternal powers leads to the disempowerment of mothers in society. The loss of maternal inheritance because of Slavery and diluted and displaced mothering because of assimilation and migration, respectively, prevent mothers from doing the significant task of cultural bearing and learning from ancestral mother-line that, if done, could develop a strong sense of identity in the children.

The girl child Florens and *Beloved* are disabled to inherit the cultural bearing from their mothers because of Slavery. For these girls, the psychological and cultural tatters of the mother-line are never repaired. However, as both novels represent these fissures in mother-line they equally represent the mothers in both novels trying to reconnect with the mother line. Sethe and Mina Mae (Floren's mother) find different ways to reconnect with their lost children. Metaphorically and literally, both mothers want to convey their mother-love to their lost daughters going beyond space and time. Sethe reconnects with her daughter after her daughter's Memory haunts her, reconciles with her, and similarly, Floren's mother speaks her heart out in the concluding chapter of *A Mercy*. Although in both cases, the reconnection of mothers with daughters is not physical, in the fictional world created by Morrison, such reconnection is made possible.

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