



Research Paper

“Exposition of Visible and Invisible Scars of Women in Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy*”

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Abstract: Toni Morrison is the first African American woman to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. In her works, she brings to light not only the experiences of African American women in a racist and male dominating society, but also the darkest realities of their life. This article explores the exposition of visible and invisible scars of women especially African American women due to slavery, violence, racism, gender disparity in her novel *A Mercy*.

Key Words: scars, violence, trauma, isolation, identity, mercy

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Morrison has dealt with the themes of violence, oppression and sacrifice in all her novels. The conflict between the black and the white communities, the victimization of the blacks by the dominant whites, the violence and bloodshed within the black communities have been presented nowhere so effectively in the entire American fiction. Though all her works are suffused with violence, Morrison has dealt with violence in each novel in a unique way and especially on women. This article explores the exposition of visible and invisible scars of women especially African American women due to slavery, violence, racism, gender disparity in her novel *A Mercy*. She writes:

I could write a book in which all the women were brave and wonderful, but it would bore me to death, and I think it would bore everybody else to death. Some women are weak and frail and hopeless, and some women are not. I write about both kinds, so one should not be more disturbing than the other. In the development of characters there is value in the different effects. (Morrison 402)

The story began by the narrator’s confession to “you”. Later we know the narrator is called Florens, a sixteen-year-old girl. “You” is Blacksmith, her lover, and the confession is inscribed on walls. Florens narrates:

I know it is true because I see it forever and ever. Me watching my mother, listening her baby boy on her hip. Senhor is not paying the whole amount he owes to Sir. Sir saying he will take instead the woman and the girl, not the baby boy and the debt is gone. A minha mae begs no. Her baby boy is still at her breast. Take the girl, she says, my daughter, she says. Me. Me. (*A Mercy* 7)

She thought her mother abandoned her, which tortured her all the time. Trauma is the enigma of having experienced and survived something that remains unknown, as Cathy Caruth explains:

The repetitions of the traumatic events which remain unavailable to consciousness but intrude repeatedly on sight thus suggest a larger relation to the event that extends beyond what can be seen or what can be known, and is inextricably tied up with the belatedness and incomprehensibility that remains at the heart of this repetitive seeing. (Caruth 92)

Further narrated by Sir Jacob he recalled his experience. When he saw Florens, her mother and her younger brother, he felt the lady must be liked by the slave owner and he will not allow Jacob to take her away. As revenge he chose this woman to solve the debt. Certainly, it was refused by the slave owner. To their astonishment, the woman came forward and begged “Please, Senhor. Not me. Take her. Take my daughter” (*A Mercy* 26). It is incredible for a mother to ask a stranger to take her daughter away.

In the final chapter, the mother voiced and told the reason why she asked a stranger to take her daughter away. In her eyes, the conduct is not a cruel behaviour but a mercy. She recalled her bitter experience.

She was shipped from Africa, sold and raped. She confided to her daughter: “I don’t know who your father is. It was too dark to see any of them. They came at night and took we three including Bess to a curing shed... 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” (*A Mercy* 163).

There is white orphan, Indian woman, free black and white indentured in this novel. By putting them together in a farm, Morrison explored the living conditions of different people, and revealed the essence of scars of Women. Four women living in the farm have various fates, but to some extent they are all enslaved and deprived of freedom. They cannot choose their destiny and social position. Just like what Lina said: “We never shape the world she says. The world shapes us” (*A Mercy* 71). Lina was the first woman bought by Jacob to the farm. Hortense Spillers clearly states the black woman’s plight in contradistinction to the black man’s in slavery:

The black females’ enslavement relegated them to the marketplace of the flesh, an act of commodification so thoroughgoing that the daughters labor even now under the outcome. Her issue became the focus of a cunning difference visually, psychologically, ontologically as the route by which the dominant modes decided the distinction between humanity and ‘other’. (155)

Rebekka was the mailed bride of Jacob from Britain. Her parents married her to Jacob just because they do not need to support her anymore. Rebekka didn’t expect too much to marry a stranger far away her home. On her ship to America, she thought “her prospects were servant, prostitute, wife, and although horrible stories were told about each of those careers, the last one seemed safest” (*A Mercy* 77-78).

But their four children died one by one, and followed by the death of Jacob. The death of her husband left her rootless, no things to lean, to rely on. Without husband, Rebekka cannot live alone, she returned to religion to gain relief. She was cruel to her servants because she thought her husband rejected her. “Refusing to enter the grand house, the one in whose construction she had delighted, seemed to him a punishment not only of herself but of everyone, her dead husband in particular” (*A Mercy* 153). She suffered spiritual slavery and hurt people surrounded her.

Florens, another slaved female in the novel, always wanted to please others. She was also slaved in spirit. At the age of sixteen, she fell in love with the blacksmith, who was a free black and hired by Jacob to build his new house. Her love was doomed to a failure because of the inequality in spirits. He leaves her second time too saying:

Because you are a slave.

What is your meaning? I am a slave because Sir trades for me.

No. You have become one.

How?

Your head is empty and your body is wild.

I am adoring you.

And a slave to that too.

You alone own me.

Own yourself, woman, and leave us be. (*A Mercy* 141)

For Florens the confrontation with the blacksmith signifies ‘emotional unbelonging.’ She attempts to explain that it is indeed someone else who determines her existence as a slave. As Welchman Jennifer contends that the notion of slavery might be “permissible as a form of servitude and may thus be defended becomes problematic as soon as we think about New World slavery” (67).

She engraved her words on the wall of a secret room in Jacob’s new house with a snail. “Don’t be afraid. My telling can’t hurt you in spite of what I have done and I promise to lie quietly in the dark weeping perhaps or occasionally seeing the blood once more but I will never again unfold my limbs to rise up and bare teeth. I explain. You can think what I tell you a confession, if you like” (*A Mercy* 1).

An in-depth review of *A Mercy* reveals the fact that feminists at this time lack a solid identity, and therefore depend on men to make all important cultural decisions. Morrison uses Florens dream as a symbol of this isolation and lack of identity, most notably when she writes, “Right away I take fright when I see my face is not there. Where my face should be is nothing” (*A Mercy* 138).

As Saidiya Hartman reminds us of the complicity of slavery and freedom, it was “the long standing ... affiliation of liberty and bondage which made it impossible to envision freedom independent of constraint, or personhood... separate from the sanctity of ... proprietarily notions of the self” (115). It is precisely in the ambiguity of Florens’s character that Morrison’s literary intervention can offer an alternative reading to this dichotomy.

Facing the absence and distortion of the native history, as a black feminist, Morrison showed her principles of feminism in her works. Oppressed racially and sexually, black women are marginalized and silenced. In her novels, Morrison finds ways to let them show their feelings. In her works, she brings to light not only the experiences of African American women in a racist and male dominating society, but also the darkest

realities of their life. No matter Florence’s carving on the walls, Lina’s recall of her family or Sorrow’s talking to her imagined twin. Morrison endowed black women ways of expressing their pains and sufferings. By releasing their painful past, they can gain their identity and subjectivity.

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