

## **Depiction of Motherhood in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy***

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### ***Abstract***

*Toni Morrison was the first black female novelist to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. Morrison's great themes are racial prejudice and slavery; but her novels are rougher, more poetic, stranger and more ambivalent than this might imply. Yet some of her greatest imaginative strengths morph at times into limitations. *A Mercy* shows both her genius and its flaws. Mother is the root of the family.*

Reference to this paper should  
be made as follows:

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*Depiction of Motherhood in  
Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*,*

Notions 2018,  
Vol. IX, No.3,  
pp. 31-45,

Article No.5

Online available at :  
[http://anubooks.com/  
?page\\_id=5005](http://anubooks.com/?page_id=5005)

## **Introduction**

Toni Morrison was the first black female novelist to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. Morrison's great themes are racial prejudice and slavery; but her novels are rougher, more poetic, stranger and more ambivalent than this might imply. Yet some of her greatest imaginative strengths morph at times into limitations. *A Mercy* shows both her genius and its flaws. Mother is the root of the family. The relationship between mother and daughter varies based on their culture, tradition and the rules of their country. Morrison's art of depicting human relationships has enthralled the readers with its gamut of emotions moving from love and desire to hate, rivalry, dislike, disassociation, jealousy, abandonment and obsession. Surprisingly, the characters trapped in the net of these sensations and feelings are not necessarily opponents but human beings who are biologically related or maybe unrelated to each other, yet are not recognized as rivals. The most common representation to this nuanced-layered link is given in mother-child relationships, and more specifically in the mother-daughter relationship. This paper focuses upon such unusual displays of maternal love and desires which are caused by severed bonds imposed upon women and children by the cruel hands of slavery.

Motherhood and mother-child relationship play an important role in African American culture and is often seriously addressed in black women's literature in relation to the theme of slavery. Black mother characters play an important role in Afro-American women's literature as black mothers pass on Afro-American family values and traditions to their daughters and empower their daughters with the knowledge needed to survive in white dominated and hostile society. The role of mother is significant. *A Mercy* plays an important role in the lives of those characters that were deprived of relations with their mothers due to harsh historical conditions of slavery. In the novel, *A Mercy* Florens' mother against her own will decides to sell her daughter to another white slave owner Jacob Vaark in order to save her from brutalities of other white slave owners. The mother hopes that her act would help her daughter escape from what many black women slaves had to suffer, abuse, rape, giving birth against their will and other forms of brutal behavior. Therefore, Florens' mother considers Jacob's acceptance to buy Florens as an act of mercy and in the very last chapter tries to explain Florens the motives of her act. "There was no animal in his heart. He never looked at me the way Senhor does. *He did not want*" (MER, 191). "*Take you, my daughter. Because I saw the tall man sees you as a human child, not pieces of eight. I knelt before him. Hoping for a miracle. He said yes. It was not a miracle. Bestowed by God. It was a mercy. Offered by a human*" (MER, 195).

Florens' mother tries to explain her daughter how her decision to sell her might protect her from dangers of men that she had experienced herself. To my mind, Morrison has carefully and masterfully arranged the narrative structure giving possibility to speak for almost all characters. When all characters give their own voice to the same events this allows a better and more vivid insight of what life for enslaved and free ones was like, whether all the characters felt and experienced the same feeling, whether all of them needed togetherness and community they tried to create and how each of them saw and felt each other. Especially affective is the final chapter told by Florens' mother, referred to as 'minha mae', who revisits the history of slavery from the point of view of black slave woman and black mother when the slavery is only in its beginning. What allows Morrison's fiction to be named as revision of black slaves' history is the way she gives subjective voices to the enslaved ones reveals their emotional and psychological depths. Remembering and recalling her experience as a black slave, Florens' mother denies the existed stereotype that black slave women were "able to produce children as easily as animals". She also reveals the veiled truth of slavery: black women were forced to breed in order to foster the productivity of slavery. Rejecting her daughter Florens' mother also denies the image of obedient black female slave and reveals herself of being strong and capable of making a decision. In addition, mother's decision to sell her daughter also stands as black woman's form of resistance against slavery and her ability to resist the commonly accepted controlling image of faithful, obedient domestic servant, or mammy image, which knows her "place" and accepts her subordination. However, for Florens this experience of being sold by her own mother is understood and experienced differently and through her own spectrum of feeling and experiences. The act of being sold by her own mother has made a crucial impact onto Florens' psychology and consciousness. The episode of the mother's eyes haunts and troubles Florens all the time; "*But I have a worry. Not because our work is more, but because mothers nursing greedy babies scare me. I know their eyes go when they choose. How they raise them to look at me hard, saying something I cannot hear. Saying something important to me, but holding the little boy's hand*" (MER, 98).

Due to slavery she did not have a possibility to be protected, taught, and instructed how to challenge racism and sexism. Although Florens did not experience as much as her mother did during the slavery, the impact of slavery still forced her to carry the psychological and emotional burden which manifests in her confusion and strong dependence to men or Lina who became her closet person and foster-parent. In addition, she constantly experiences the search of her mother and often sees the

act of selling in her dreams: “*That is a better dream than a minha mae standing near with her little boy. In those dreams she always wants to tell me something. Is stretching her eyes is working her mouth. I look away from her*” (MER, 119). Therefore Morrison purposely uses unconventional narrative technique to give an individual voice of each character in every chapter as it is hard and but impossible to understand the behavior and motives only from one character or narrator’s position. Unconventional and unexpected black mothers’ acts are typical in Afro-American women’s and especially Morrison’s fiction, which can be misunderstood or misinterpreted as inhuman by white readers. But exactly such acts help to reveal what measures have to be taken by a black woman in order to protect their children, especially daughters. Additionally, it stresses the impact of slave experience upon black woman’s destiny and reveals black woman’s ability to survive by their own measures in the harshest conditions. Such black mother’s act poses a question to the reader: where lies the cost and measure of mother’s love? Additionally, the author shows the scope of negative effects on Florens’ psyche and understanding of the world. Being deprived of maternal love and care, she passionately seeks love and naively accepts any male attentive paid to her: “*A boy and a dog drive goats past us. He raises his hat. That is the first time any male does it to me. I like it*” (MER, 44). And although Lina having experience tries to protect Florens as her own daughter. Florens will develop her own independence and feminine identity through her own exploration and experiences.

The importance of material feelings to black woman’s identity and the theme of motherhood are also examined through Sorrow’s character in *A Mercy*, who at the beginning of the novel stands out as an exceptional outcast being name of Sorrow by her servants. The act of white servant’s imposing a name to black woman reveals the complicated condition of black women slaves: they were not only physically exploited, but they were deprived of their names and thus, identities. However, Sorrow finds her own means of self- development. She is constantly talking to her imagined self-Twin, which shows the state of her split identity. Nevertheless, the awareness of being pregnant and material feeling is the most important change in her life which enables her life which enables her to recognize and value herself: “*Sorrow’s jaw dropped. Then she flushed with pleasure at the thought of a real person, a person of her own, growing inside her*” (MER,145). She was convinced that this time she had done something, something important, by herself. Twin’s absence was hardly noticed as she concentrated on her daughter. Instantly, she knew how to name her. Knew also what to name herself. Sorrow’s maternal experience reveal how important mother-child relationships are to both child and black mother who

regains her self-consciousness, rejects the imposed name Sorrow and identifies herself as Complete after giving a birth. “*I am your mother;*” she said, “*My name is Complete*”. (MER, 158).

Morrison in this novel stresses a crucial difference between being given the name and consciously naming oneself Complete which conveys completeness, autonomy and sense of acquired own identity. The writer asserts that when black people are brought from Africa their names are gone, which is very problematic, because their name is not only theirs it also refers to African family and African tribe. Being deprived of such cultural and historical heritage leaves a “huge psychological scar” on black person’s psyche. Therefore, the author suggests that “the best thing you can do is take another name which is yours because it reflects something about you or your own choice” (Morrison 1981). Similarly, black female slave Lina was also deprived of her identity not only because she was enslaved and sold under harsh conditions but she was also renamed and baptized according to the wishes of the whites: “*They name her Messalina, just in case, but shortened it to Lina to signal a sliver of hope. Afraid of once more losing shelter, terrified of being alone in the world without family, Lina acknowledged her status as heathen and let herself be purified by these worthies*” (MER,55). Lina has lost all of her ties to her family which has affected her sense of self and need to establish the relationship with someone. The memories of her burned village together with people constantly remind Lina of the experienced trauma of her ancestors and vital need for them and their history that has been burned directly. Due to the brutality of white slave owners Lina was forced to feel shame and guilt of having survived however, not free at all. Black women were forced to believe that they are only worth for being sold as labor force, nothing else, no femininity, no beauty were added to them. Black woman was valued for only what she could or could not do rather than for what she was.

Lina is depicted as an exceptionally insightful and experienced black woman who having experienced the hardships of enslavement is aware of the fact how dependent they all are to each other living the wilderness when there is nothing else to bound a them for, they were orphans, each and all. Although being enslaved, Lina clearly understands how important for people’s survival external bonds are. She understands that her white masters had failed believing that they can survive in a wild place all alone relying only on their pride. Lina’s experience of being completely alone and deprived of her own family and history show how important these bonds to person’s survival are, even for white masters too. For black enslaved females left alone in wilderness the situation in Lina’s view was even more complicated. Through

Lina's voice Morrison gives the possibility for all African Americans to say their understanding and experience of what it means to live in America, which is their home but in which they are forced to feel as aliens: "You and I, this land is our home, *she whispered, "but unlike you I am exile here"* (MER,69).

Female characters in *A Mercy* are also enslaved in terms of love, passion and emotions. Florens' conversation with her beloved Blacksmith shows the impact of physical slavery on black woman's life: black woman is not only deprived normally expected, but on the other hand, emotional and passionate enslavement becomes a means and part of black female's own identity and personality. Due to black slavery, black women underwent exceptionally complicated experience. Being raped and humiliated for a long time they had to find their own ways to express black female identity. Black slave daughters, especially orphan daughters also were not aware of family models and had to suffer from imposed stereotypes. Therefore, black woman had to find their own means of their own development. Florens' open and free investigation of her and man's body as well as her growing sexual desire and hunger for love reveals her own growth and development towards her black feminine self. Morrison's treatment of her characters openly expressed and experienced sexuality emphasizes author's wish and ability to break the formerly existing stereotypes of black woman. Black woman's body has long been regarded as sexual object of sin and filthiness. And for a black slave woman herself it was hard to undergo and overcome the imposed negative stereotypes and psychological as well as physical scars of rape trauma. Therefore, the appreciation and value of one's own body and sexual desire can be treated as black woman's ability to regain her feminine consciousness and self-esteem even if it requires overcoming the imposed stereotype by white dominated society and one's own fears. Florens' character not only emphasizes black woman's strength and independence but it also challenges white stereotype based literary criticism which advocated for the stereotyped image of black woman as to sexually active, or even having animal like features. In fact, this stereotype developed from white slave owners' brutal treatment of black women who were treated as sexual objects rather than human beings.

The writer constantly changes narrative point of view in the novel and this allows examining Florens' personal change and growth from other characters' point of view too. For example her personal development is noticed and examined by two slave men Willard and Scully which shows that her alteration affects the people surrounding her. What Willard and Scully notice in Florens' character is her acquired strength and inaccessibility which as if vibrates around her: "*Strangest was Florens, The docile creature they knew had turned feral* (MER, 71), if he had been interested

in rape, Florens would have been his prey. It was easy to spot that combination of defenseless, eagerness to please... Clearly, from the look of her now, that was no longer true. The instant he saw her marching down the road-whether ghost or soldier-he knew she had become untouchable. Thus her change from “*have me always*” to “*don’t touch me ever*” seemed to him as predictable as it was marked” (MER, 79).

In the novel *A Mercy* the writer reminds the readers how dangerous and powerful negative stereotypes to the self-consciousness and identity of a black woman were and to what extremes black women were forced to go in order to survive or protect each other, especially their daughters. For example, an episode in *A Mercy* reveals white stereotyped belief that black girl is a devil. Therefore, her mother is forced to cut her legs and renew the bleeding in order to prove the daughter is human being, otherwise, she would not bleed: “*This is my daughter Jane, the Widow says. Those lashes may save her life.*”(MER, 127) “*So I know it is Daughter Jane who says how I can prove I am not a demon and it is the Widow who says it is they who will decide.*” (MER, 128). By depicting such crucial scenes of what black women had to suffer during and after slavery, Morrison not only revives the history of black slavery but also achieve one of her most important preoccupation: she forces the reader to examine the consciousness of both the enslaved one and the ones who enslaved others, ie., white slave owners. The writer reveals what happens in the mind of those who impose negative stereotypes on blacks. Imposing a negative feature on black slave was the easiest way for slave owners to assert their white superiority and excuse white men of their rape acts and brutal treatment of black women slaves.

Florens’ personal observations about white people and their racially biased standpoint reveals Florens’ ability to understand what stereotype and negative image is being imposed on her. Being aware of it she stands out as strong self-conscious young woman and denies another existed stereotype that black slaves were illiterate. What is most important, her understanding and awareness of what is being imposed on her shows that she is not only strong enough to resist these stereotypes but also her strong sense of her own self which is independent and irresistible of others’ attitude. The way black female characters perceive their lives and the world they live in is another means to reveal them as black female individuals rather than black objects.

In addition, black women’s relationship with one another also plays an important role in the process of black woman’s positive and individual self-definition. Morrison is one of those black women writers who address black female relationships

in a serious manner. Black women's relationship with each other becomes their distinctive means of recovery from racial and sexist oppression and self definition because they share common experience and common values. Black women's relationships are especially revealed when black women have to survive on their own without men. Morrison in *A Mercy* even breaks the stereotype of hostility between black and white women. When white character Rebekka's husband dies and she is left only with her black female servants. Lina Sorrow and Florens, all women, especially Rebekka and Lina understand that need to find their own ways of survival without men, "When the Europe wife stepped down from the cart, hostility between them was instant. The health and beauty of a young female already in charge annoyed the new wife; while the assumption of authority from the awkward Europe girl infuriated Lina. Additionally, both women had a common feeling of fear for men and only togetherness was their form of protection and survival: *"Although they had nothing in common with the views of each other, they had everything in common with one thing the promise and threat of men. Here, they agreed, was where security and risk lay"* (MER, 115).

Thus mothering and motherhood have been controversial topics of discussion in the novel *A Mercy*. All the characters had been associated with women's oppression as well as their empowerment in Morrison's works. Although institutions of marriage and motherhood are various modes of a woman's subjugation, her stance as a mother can still be seen as a source of power. Morrison's reflections on mothering embody her strongest views on the strength of black women as mothers. Though black mother-daughter relationship cannot be studied without the knowledge of its racial and socio-cultural background, stories of Morrison's fictions, especially *A Mercy* create an enriched but complex picture of motherhood.

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