

A Mercy- A Rendezvous with Histories and Memories

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ABSTRACT

Toni Morrison's speaks about the untold tales of slavery in America. It is the story of Florence and Jacob Vaark. Morrison speaks about the causes of racism, dissecting its early roots. It is a touching testimony of the Black American motherhood and speaks about freedom, mercy and kindness. This novella expresses the experience of mercies felt by the characters. Morrison breaks the syntactic rules of the masters' discourse. Here Morrison inscribes the forgotten histories though the erased memories. Her humbling language reinforces the fact that her characters' strength lies in their memories and in voicing those memories. Rather than the Eurocentric concepts of linearity and subjective self-centered narrative tropes, Morrison concentrates more on an open ended circular narration where we come across a common good for all, where community matters more than the individual. This beautiful prose-poem, blends history (personal as well as political), psychological anxieties, and biblical re-readings.

KEYWORDS

Black America; Self Centered; Narration; Anxiety.

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The LORD is gracious, and full of compassion; slow to anger, and of great mercy. The LORD is good to all: and his tender mercies are over all his works. (Psalm 145: 8-9)

David in his book of Psalms in the Holy Bible dedicates a greater share to sing on God's mercy. Toni Morrison's latest book is also more or less like a psalm or a prayer where number of characters offer their supplications, before the Lord, without making any wrangle. Unlike her other novels this novella expresses the experience of mercies felt by the characters. Along with its stylistic peculiarities another feature that we notice

is her exceptional language. During her Nobel Lecture on December 7 1993, Morrison explains at length about the beauty and subtlety of language. She says, '...Language can never "pin down" slavery, genocide, war. Nor should it yearn for the arrogance to be able to do so. Its force, its felicity is in its search to the ineffable.' (Morrison 1993). She begins her talk by telling a story "Once upon a time there was an old woman. Blind but wise." The story is about a blind black woman, who is the daughter of black American slaves.

This story is an allegory of a woman and a bird. Morrison after narrating the story explains that this woman and the bird symbolize a creative writer and her language which represents her means and medium. This novella from the title to the

last word represents her conviction regarding language. With a combination of two words she articulates the benevolent attitude of both God and man. It is the story of a group of women, who represents the mothers, sisters, wives and maids of early seventeenth century America. This microcosm represents the Native American Messalina who becomes Lina, the enslaved black mother and her daughter Florence, the wild child-mother Sorrow, the devoted wife of Jacob Vaark who travelled a great distance to meet her husband, Rebecca and two indentured slaves. Toni Morrison describes the beauty and power of language, which is the writer's tool during her Nobel Lecture. She says,

The vitality of language lies in its ability to limn the actual, imagined and possible lives of its speakers, reads, writers. Although its poise is sometimes in displacing experience, it is not a substitute for it. It arcs toward the place where meaning lie. ...Word-work is sublime, she thinks, because it is generative; it makes meaning that secures our difference, our human difference-the way in which we are like no other life. We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives. (Morrison: 1993)

Here we come across a series of characters who are at the mercy of others. Whether they are African or Native American or European, these characters carry their painful memories of the past, which bolster them to live the present and hope for a beautiful future. This novel describes the growth of the institution of slavery during its introductory stages, when slaves were treated more or less like animals, when there was a tremendous rummage for land and women. Along with presenting an unwritten portion of history, the language with which depicts those unwritten stories is astounding. It is in sync with the

characters' psyche. She enunciates the alternative desires of the margins and the muffled stories. Morrison breaks the syntactic rules of the masters' discourse. Her humbling language reinforces the fact that her characters' strength lies in their memories and in voicing those memories. As Sam Durrant explains in his book *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning: J. M. Coetzee, Wilson Harris, and Toni Morrison* (2004) 'Postcolonial narrative, which addresses the individual reader both in his or her singularity and as a member of wider communities, is caught between these two commitments: its transformation of the past into a narrative is simultaneously an attempt to summon the dead and lay them to rest.' (2004: 9).

The characters that we come across in *A Mercy*, offer a critical way of thinking to look at the trauma and the painful memories that one carry as a back pack during the journey from place to place. As Dominic La Capra acknowledges in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001), "[s]lavery, like Holocaust, nonetheless presents, for a people, problems of traumatization, severe oppression, a divided heritage, the question of a founding trauma, the forging of identities in the present and so forth." (2001: 174). Rather than the Eurocentric concepts of linearity and subjective self-centered narrative tropes, Morrison concentrates more on an open ended circular narration where we come across a common good for all, where community matters more than the individual and the group and its members are thinking together. In this novella there is an image of circularity with special reference to the imageries and certain scenes. Morrison expects an active readers and their participation in unlocking the puzzle that she creates within the story. In one of her interviews she tells,

My writing expects, demands participatory reading, and that I think is what literature is supposed to do. It's not just about telling the

story; it's about involving the reader. The reader supplies the emotions. The reader supplies even some of the color, some of the sound. My language has to have holes and spaces so the reader can come into it. He or she can feel something visceral, see something striking. Then we [you, the reader, and I, the author] come together to make this book, to feel this experience. (1983:125)

She believes in the magic of language, and for her the work of language is sublime. She believes in language, and she has her firm conviction in the beauty of the language and in the person who uses the language. She is the one who "can speak the language that tells us what only language can; how to see without pictures. Language alone protects us from the scariness of things with no names. Language alone is meditation." (Morrison: 1993) It is very difficult to find a writer who has such an esteem and commitment to her medium of expression.

In this novel the characters define themselves through their experiences. Their stories which are nothing but their experience which gets revealed to us through their mysterious and unexpected language, expresses the unlimited range and rage of Morrison's craftswomanship. She renovates the unspeakable to speakable. We come across those characters whose present is chaperoned by the past and the memories. In this narrative Morrison restores the uncharted zone of the interior sphere. Morrison accepts and expresses the curative power of her community, and the sister feeling that the women feel for the fellow beings. In this novella the whole set of characters carries a painful past which is the real boost for their survival, and so they are powerful enough to support and guide their fellow beings. So the novel which begins by describing the ill-fated Florence, concludes with a Florence who is bold

enough to accept the she is wild and she will keep on living, even if the blacksmith is not with her. She has a heart made of gold, even if her colour is black. Even if this novella is a slave narrative, it presents another side of the slavery, where at times we come cross manifestations of God's mercy to his people through his creations.

Morrison revises and revisits history by incorporating certain metafictional elements. She presents a map of Andaste Indians, early North Americans in the inside title page itself, which will foreshadows the plot of the story and its transgression of boundaries. It tells the story of the slaves as well as masters, it tells the story of whites, blacks, native Americans, mulattos etc. It is self-reflexive and at the same time questions the frontiers of history (actual as well as fictional). She digs out the archives to present the agony and tribulations suffered by our foremothers. Hers is an attempt to speak out the strangled histories of her people to the world. In doing so she plays with the memories of the characters. As Nicola King writes in *Memory, Narrative, Identity: remembering the self* (2000), 'Individual memories of personal histories are constantly reworked and retranslated in the present; so traumatic historical events seem to demand re-representation and re-reading, to resist the memorialisation which is also a kind of forgetting that assumes that remembering is finished.' (2000: 180)

In the forgotten histories, the hardships and emotional angst get disappeared as pale shades. This novella can be grouped in the genre of works which she termed as the village literature. As she explains, it is a 'fiction that is really for the village, for the tribe...They should clarify the roles that have become obscured, they ought to identify those things in the past that are useful and those things that are not; and they ought to give nourishment.' (1981: 26) Morrison, the poignant wordsmith is always praised for

her wild, animated and down to- earth stories that are always linked to the untold histories, and her deft use of the master's language to depict it before the readers is always appreciated. Each of her works is an artistic illustration linking the folktales and lost tales, of the people of the past. Her Nobel lecture depicts her conviction as a novelist, as a crafts woman and her commitment as a true representative of her people. Her pen is her magic wand with which she creates the whole enchanted world in her novels. Unlike her other novels, here she represents another side of the history where, women as a whole, irrespective of black or white or brown, comes together to share a space of their own. The sister feeling that one share for another, and their courage to live the life instead of bickering, and demands gives a new direction for the theorists of the 21st century to have a strong conviction regarding the ideology that they highlight, and to fight for the same. This book is wonderful artifact which truly represents the hardships faced by the travelers during the Atlantic slave trade.

'This lecture remains a tour de force in its philosophical mediation on and its practical demonstration of the generative power of language.'(2008: 25) The novel begins through Florence's narration, where she warns the readers 'Don't be afraid. My telling can't hurt you in spite of what I have done' (1). The first page itself introduces a series of surrealistic images which will create an element of 'what next!' in the readers. We can see series of flash backs, and multinarratives, but all these elements gives the novella a peculiar beauty which is unspeakable. The first person and third person come successively when we move from one chapter to another. Out of the twelve chapters six chapters are dedicated to the first person narrative by Florence, whereas the intermittent chapters tells the stories of the other six characters in the novella. Her craft is poised and it suits to tell the stories

of different people from different places at the same time. It is adept to the crossovers that occur unceasingly.

Florence begins her tale by proclaiming that her tales can hurt others. In the beginning itself we come across the imagery of blood, '...weeping perhaps or occasionally seeing the blood once more- ' (1)

The massive loss to the African labour force was made more critical because it was composed of able-bodied young men and young women. Slave buyers preferred their victims between the ages of 15 and 35, and preferably in the early twenties; the sex ratio being about two men to one woman. Europeans often accepted younger African children, but rarely any older person. They shipped the most healthy wherever possible, taking the trouble to get those who had already survived an attack of smallpox, and who were therefore immune from further attacks of that disease, which was then one of the world's great killer diseases. (<http://www.marxists.org/subject/africa/rodney-walter/how-europe/ch04.htm#s1>)

In the first chapter Florence tells her fancy to wear shoes always, and how she tries to get her feet with in the throw away shoes of the Senhora. Lina, her later acquaintance tells her that her legs are too tender because she is wearing shoes always. Florence is carrying her Mistress' letter to the Blacksmith. Here Morrison plays with the word 'lettered'. During slavery it is a practice to mark the slaves, to show that they are legally purchased. These magical constructs out of the language express the beauty of the language. Florence thinks '...I am lettered but I do not read what Mistress writes and Lina and Sorrow cannot. But I know what it means to say to any who stop me.' (2)The story gains its impetus from this journey of the protagonist.

Even if she is a slave in the North America, she cannot think of leaving her

feet bare. She wants to fit in someone's shoes. But for her mother a shoe is a luxury and Lina, her friend tells her that life requires tougher feet instead of tender. 'As a result Lina says, my feet are useless, will always be too tender for life and never have the strong soles, tougher than leather, that life requires.' (2)

She attacks the missionaries who set about another kind of exploitation, in the name of salvation. Their idea of Christianity always gives them a hope that even though we have to suffer all the hardships during our stay on earth, there is a hope of life after the death. As Florence says 'We are baptized and can have happiness when this life is done.' (4)

For her, her mother is a *minha mae*. Jacob Vaark takes her from her mother as D'Ortega; the Portuguese man is unable to pay his debts. Morrison presents the North America of 1680s. Florence relates the landscape with the hell, may be as part of her Catholic upbringing, 'When I arrive here, I believe it is the place he warns against. The freezing in hell that comes before the everlasting The freezing in hell that comes before the everlasting fire were sinners bubble and sings forever.' (7) This is an instance where Morrison laughs at the Christian preaching of penance and punishment.

Morrison introduces the Portugal master, to highlight the fact that the first European slave traders were from Portugal, and they built the first European fort in Africa in 1481, which was called Fort Elmina. Jacob Vaark's story goes parallel with the story of the history of slavery when it is a practice to ship Africans from their homelands, to European countries, and during the course some will lose their lives, some will be maimed, virgins will become mothers and they can always expect the worse. Jacob Vaark, who explored Mary land, is an exceptional representative of a man with the humanitarian concerns to preserve humanity instead of exploiting them. He

moves from Virginia, where '...lawless laws encouraging cruelty in exchange for common cause, if not common virtue' (8-9), to Mary land. A Mercy is in a 'polyglot, alchemical manner'. 'Her characters enter the fictive world as well as partial, fragmented selves ceaselessly reconstructing the past in the present, always in an open ended and protean fashion'(2008: 1283)

Jacob Vaark considers his life as 'a mix of confrontation, risk and placating.'(10) He was an agent of the British company, which captures land and attaches it to the Church or Royalty. Then he came to Mary land where the authority allowed trade with foreign markets. Among the foreign masters who are hunting slaves and land, he is an exception. Morrison presents him before us during his journey to D'Ortega's farm to collect his debts. But D'Ortega wants to pacify him, and instead of money he offers him a slave. But Vaark who thinks that 'flesh was not my commodity', feels uneasy about the whole deal. 'Whatever it was, he couldn't stay there surrounded by a passel of slaves whose silence made him imagines an avalanche seen from a great distance. No sound, just the knowledge of a roar he could not hear. He begged off, saying the proposal was not acceptable-too much trouble to transport, manage, auction; his solitary, unencumbered proficiency was what he liked about trade.' (20-21). But for D'Ortega, 'the value of a seasoned slave is beyond adequate.'(23), to which Vaark can only comment that 'My trade is goods and gold, sir' (23). Out of compulsion Vaark demands one lady from the Senhora's kitchen, but they are not willing to give her to him. Then we come across Florence, who is the black woman's child. Vaark saw her as "Just then the little girl stepped from behind the mother. On her feet was a pair of way-too-big woman's shoes. Perhaps it was that feeling of license, a newly recovered recklessness along with the sight of those little legs rising like two

bramble sticks from the bashed and broken shoes, that made him laugh.” (24) And in the next instant Florence’s mother begged him to take her, and Vaark thinks about taking her to his home, not as a slave but as a help to his wife and a companion to his son. In this domestic slave market, the daughter, whose worth is twenty pieces of silver, replaces the mother.

Here Morrison presents two masters, with contrasting characters. One who sale land and another who sale slaves. During Vaark’s return journey Morrison tells us about the atrocities of the institution’s beginning stages in European colonies. Vaark stays in a tavern where his inmates are discussing about the shipment of slaves to work in the plantations of Barbados. ‘They ship in more. Like firewood, what burns to ash is refueled. And don’t forget, there are births. The place is stew of mulattoes, creoles, zambos, mestizos, lobos, chinos, coyotes.’(28). They discuss how the masters invest the slave labour in their plantations to harvest more profit. Jacob Vaark is an exception from his fellow masters. He who values humanity more than money is terribly disturbed by these tales of the poor mortals. Vaark being a ‘misborn and disowned’(31), ‘feel a disturbing pulse of pity for orphans and strays, remembering well their and his own sad teeming in the markets, lanes, alleyways, and ports of every region he traveled.’(31)

After the story of Jacob Vaark, comes the story of Lina. Lina always carries an unfathomable puzzle regarding non-Europeans and Europeans. ‘Europes could calmly cut mothers down, blast old men in the face with muskets louder than moose calls, but were enraged if a not-Europe looked a Europe in the eye. On the one hand they would torch your home; on the other they would feed, nurse and bless you.’(44). Lina is brought by Jacob Vaark as an assistant to his wife, Rebekka. Florence, who towards the end becomes the saviour of her mistress by bringing the blacksmith

considers herself as a superior being, when Lina says her that ““You are one leaf on his tree,” Florence shook her head, closed her eyes and replied, “No. I am his tree.”’(59) The beginning of the chapter which introduces Rebekka to the readers portrays the hardships and trials that she suffered during her journey to Mary land. ‘I shat among strangers for six weeks to get to this land.’(70). Like Jacob Vaark, she describes her journey from different places to Mary land. Rebekka has to travel a long distance to marry a stranger. For her ‘It was seal and deal.’(84). In this chapter through the musings of Rebekka, we come across a re-reading of the Job, in the old Testament. Job, who has been tested by Satan, with God’s permission, is ready to give everything to God’s disposal. As Rebekka thinks,

He lay wracked with pain and in moral despair; they told him about themselves, and when he felt even worse, he got an answer from God saying, Who on earth do you think you are? Question me? Let me give you a hint of who I am and what I know. For a moment Job must have longed for the self-interested musings of humans as vulnerable and misguided as he was. But a peek into Divine knowledge was less important than gaining, at last, the Lord’s attention. Which, Rebekka concluded, was all Job ever wanted. Nor proof of his existence-he never questioned that. Nor proof of his power-everyone accepted that. He wanted simply to catch His eye. To be recognized not as worthy or worthless, but to be noticed as a life-form by the One who made and unmade it. Not a bargain; merely a glow of the miraculous.(89)

During Florence trip to find the blacksmith, she is entertained by Daughter Jane and her widowed mother Ealing. Later she finds the blacksmith with the boy Malaik. Later there is an encounter between the boy and Florence and that made the blacksmith to cast her out of his house.

Sorrow is another character who is shipped from abroad, working as an assistant in Vaark's family. She doesn't have an identity of her own until she delivers a baby, and then she changes her name to Complete. Hers is the most moving representation of maternity that we come across in the novella. Sorrow is a synthesis of innocence and wildness.

The last but third chapter is the most magical of all the chapters that we come across. We can find the dead Jacob Vaark coming out of his grave to visit his beautiful villa, in which he longed to live. Here we come across two indentured male slaves Willard and Scully. In the second last chapter we come across a tougher and stronger Florence, whose shoes are taken away from her. During her return trip, she walks barefoot. She learned the greatest lesson that the slave should be tougher and stronger. Once the blacksmith tells her that slaves are sometimes freer than free men. Florence thinks 'One is a lion in the skin of an ass. The other is an ass in the skin of a lion. That it is the withering inside that enslaves and opens the door for what is wild.' (158). Here we come across a sister feeling that the daughter share with her mother. She says, 'Mae, you can have pleasure now because the soles of my feet are hard as cypress.'(159)

In the last chapter we come across the narrator, as Florence's other, not Florence, but her mother. Morrison here expertly camouflages the virtues of a mother and a daughter. The last chapter hints at the atrocities during the trans Atlantic cross and the pain and hardships suffered by the women in the ship. This chapter seems like a closing prayer, a prayer to God as well as to the man who came to save her daughter, Florence. Florence's mother delineates how the men handled the women who are landed in the shore, how the African women are penalized twice and thrice. The bloody institution of slavery pawns their individuality, their humanity and their

chastity. She says, 'I don't know who is your father. It was too dark to see any of them. They came at night and took we three including Bess to a curing shed. Shadows of men sat on barrels, then stood. 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.' (161). The whites attacked the other's land and confiscated them; they molested the women and treated them worse than animals. They 'thrive on insults over cattle, women, water, crops.' (161). She who is proud on being a negrita, is searching an element of mercy in many eyes. She cannot find it in the white masters, or even in the Senhor and Senhora, but it is there in the eyes of Vaark, and that provoked her to give her daughter to Vaark.

Then she elucidates this concept of mercy that is there in Vaark's eyes as miracle, or as a mercy. A Mercy explains this other side of slavery where the slaves can at times find elements of love and mercy here and there. The novel's concluding note is an advice to her daughter as well as the novelist's exhortation to the readers. '...to be given dominion over another is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing.'(165)

A Mercy like a prose poem manifests elements of mercies which are veiled and unveiled. This beautiful prose-poem, blends history (personal as well as political), psychological anxieties, and biblical re-readings. One can observe a marked shift in the paradigm of narrative, where Morrison intentionally shifts from the European construct of syntactic structures and rules. The crisp and clear statements that carry the heavy haversack of emotions hit as canons at the audience. All the characters while telling their tales of journey and search prefers to move back in time so that they can gain more strength and vivacity from their life itself. They are now displaced from their immediate

surroundings, from their very roots. This dislocation along with the struggle to withstand the environment and the diseases in an alien land make them blooming and determined. Morrison tells us what lies underneath the surface of slavery. To some extent this is an anthropological text in the veil of a simple narrative.

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