

Trauma and Treatment in Morrison's Novels with Special Reference to *A Mercy*

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Abstract: Toni Morrison suggests in her novels that in order to survive, oppressed black people has to visit the past and talk about their suffering and seek ways to heal themselves by the means of kinship and community support. The purpose of verbalizing the experience that has caused mental trauma can lead to healing and recovery. Being heard by a supportive community is a useful tool of recovery for the victims. Since the trauma is caused by separation, rejection, discrimination and dehumanization, being embraced by community can act as a healer. According to Morrison, it is in the community that a person learns how to be an individual and himself; how to adore privacy and at the same time belong to something larger, that is society. This article reveals Florens's state of mind, a traumatized young slave who shares her story with a black man whom she considers her security from harm.

Keywords: American Slavery, Racial discrimination, Gender discrimination, Dehumanization, Trauma, Stress disorder, Community, Treatment.

Toni Morrison is one of the most talented contemporary American writers deeply concerned with the issues of race and gender discrimination, struggles of oppressed people in the society and the concept of freedom. Retelling slaves' stories, she brings light to the altogether forgotten aspects of Black American life and in this way she "give(s) voice to the voiceless and record(s) a history of [faceless, shadowless] people who have been ignored or purposely forgotten" (Rayner and Butler 177).

Being part of the serious literature, with sophisticated concepts and points, her works demand close reading and examination. In order to give a deeper understanding, at times, one narrator of the story defines what the other is unaware of. Morrison doesn't simply note the factoids and concepts from history, but gives back the voice of ordinary people who were deprived of it for many centuries and lets them tell their story, their own version of history. In the sense, her works are self-deconstructive. Commenting on the text being self-deconstructive, Troy Seaward quotes from John Lye:

It is possible that texts which 'confess' the highly mediated nature of our experience, texts which themselves throw the reader into the realm of complex, contested, symbolized, interstitial, interactive mediated experience, texts which therefore move closer than usual to deconstructing themselves, are in a sense closer to reality (that is, the truth of our real experience) than any other texts. (3)

A Mercy, the latest publication among Morrison's celebrated body of work, goes back to the early days of American slavery and depicts the experience of a young enslaved black girl called Florens, whose mother gives her up as a desperate act of sacrificial love when she is just eight years old. The novel grows out of the intersection of thoughts, inner feelings, imaginations, dreams and life experiences of different narrators. The variety of voices narrating the story gives this opportunity to see one single event from different angles and points of view, and applying this technique allows Morrison's work to reach beyond the single story told by the narrator, and the reader gains more information and finds out the reality and the hidden experiences of the characters' lives. The main focus of this paper is to see how the characters in *A Mercy* deal with the trauma caused by slavery and discrimination; and if they are able to find a treatment for their injuries and survive. Some examples from Morrison's other novels has added to shed more light to the topic under study.

For Florens "the beginning begins with the shoes" and her desire to wear high heels. She never comes to know why her mother doesn't like her to do so. From an exterior gaze, it might look very natural for a young girl to be interested in this type of shoes, but not for a slave. She is told that her feet are "useless, will always be too tender for life and never have the strong soles, tougher than leather, that life requires" (*Mercy* 2). Word by word, the text goes deeper to Florens' life and the way her dreams get shattered and her desire for having a family, love and protection becomes unreachable; and the trauma gets revealed gradually.

To have a closer look and a better understanding of the characters' state of mind, it is helpful to know what the meaning of trauma is and what it means to suffer from it. Trauma is defined by Cathy Caruth as "a response, sometimes delayed, to an overwhelming event or events, which takes the form of repeated intrusive hallucinations, dreams, thoughts or behaviours stemming from the event, along with numbing that may have begun during or after the experience, and possibly also increased arousal to (and avoidance of) stimuli recalling the event" (Caruth 4).

The techniques Morrison employs in writing novels, the bold shifts in point of view provide the details that reinforce the theme. The advantage is that her texts do not simply transfer the author's ideas; and that the experiences can be understood differently as interpreted differently by narrators, according to their perceptions of specific situations. It is these slight variations and differences that make the difference, and ultimately enrich the texts. Through narrating their life story they reveal some kind of mental trauma that is reflected in their songs, dreams and each word they use to express themselves. This mental trauma is mostly caused by the loss of family ties, encounter with violence, absence of love and sense of belonging, lack of support and protection, witness to death and the sense of being vulnerable and helplessness. Among many characters who suffer these are Pecola, Colly and Pauline in *The Bluest Eye*; Guitar, Macon, Solomon, Ryna, Ruth and Hagar in *Song of Solomon*; Denver, Sethe, Beloved, Paul. D. Baby Suggs, Halle in *Beloved*; Joe, Violet and even Golden Gray in *Jazz*; Heed and Christine in *Love*; Florens, her

mother, Lina, Sorrow and many other characters in *A Mercy*. The events they had no control on has left great impacts on their lives and in order to survive, they have to find some treatment for them.

Although uncovering the power relations, Morrison leaves the judgement to the reader and does not offer a treatment for the trauma caused by slavery and racism and their continuing effects, and she argues that "the real conversation should take place among white people. They should talk to each other about that. Not with me. I can't be the doctor and the patient" (Kachka), but still one can find out the remedy the characters apply for themselves in the form of retelling their stories to each other. *A Mercy* starts with telling about incidents observed by the innocent eye of Florens and the writer's emphasis on her imperfect awareness. One of these incidents is the time she says: "they [the slaves] are certain their years of debt are over but the master says no. . . . I don't understand why they are sad. Everyone has to work. I ask are you leaving some one dear behind? All heads turn toward me and the wind dies" (*Mercy* 38). Although her state of awareness improves during the course of novel, but still it is incomplete and other voices accompany her to avoid the reader reads the whole *Wide Sargasso Sea* to know the feelings and attitudes of "the mad woman in the attic" of Brönte's Jane Eyre.

Looking at Florens' suffering along with Beloved's ghost, one can trace the same urge for maternal love that both girls are deprived of. Being killed by her mother, Beloved never realizes the meaning of this act and her anger toward Sethe is everlasting. Similarly Florens, who believes a *minha mãe* (my mother in Portuguese) has chosen her little boy over her and has thrown her away, never looks at her mother who wants to say something important to her in dreams. In this way both stories examine the physical and the mental trauma caused by slavery. The relation of mother-daughter, the most powerful link between two human beings, in both stories is cut by slavery. Sethe murders her daughter to get her rid of the miserable life under schoolteacher; and *minha mãe* gives her daughter to a stranger whom she thinks "has no animal in his heart," (*Mercy* 161) and hopes she will have a better life.

The mothers depicted in these novels have endured the dehumanizing effects of slavery and are treated worse than animals. Living under the rules and obligations of a master who believes "unlike a snake or a bear, a dead nigger could not be skinned for profit and was not worth his own dead weight in coin" (*Beloved* 148). Sethe is whipped and her milk is taken away by schoolteacher's nephews. Sethe's maternal love makes her to do her best to avoid her child suffers the miserable life of slavery, however the safety is provided with a handsaw. "It was absolutely right thing to do," Morrison comments "but also the thing you have no right to do" (Rothstein). Florens's mother is getting treated like an animal each time she is getting matted by the order of Senhor, the master who can only think of his profit, and that the value of a seasoned slave is beyond adequate" (*Mercy* 23). To protect Florens from the harsh destiny awaiting her where there is "no protection," her mother pleads Vaark to take Florens as the payment of the master's debt.

Putting together the sufferings of *Beloved's* characters with *A Mercy's*, the intention is to show how retelling their stories, each novel adds layers to African –American experience and trauma; the trauma that is transferred from generation to generation, from individual to individual and from mother to daughter. We can see so many incidents of this sort in Morrison's work, like Denver, who is affected by her mother's murder of Beloved. While it is her turn to tell her story in first person, she says, "Beloved is my sister. I swallowed her blood right along with my mother's milk. . . . All the time, I'm afraid the thing that happened that made it all right for my mother to kill my sister could happen again (*Beloved* 205).

In *Jazz*, Violet decides not to have children as a result of the mental trauma caused by her mother's suicide and it leads to her feeling of deep loneliness that can be seen in sleeping with dolls and keeping birds at home. After all, she finds some sense of relief in talking to Alice Manfred, Dorcas' aunt. In expressing the nostalgic memories and sharing the experiences with Paul D., Sethe too feels relieved to some extent. The purpose of verbalizing the experience that has caused mental trauma, therefore, is healing and recovery. Being heard by a supportive community as Morrison suggests in her novels can be a useful tool of recovery for the victims. Since the trauma is caused by exclusion, separation, rejection, discrimination and dehumanization, being embraced by community can act as a healer. And it is in the community that a person learns how "to be an individual and yourself and how to adore privacy and at the same time belong to something larger [that is society]" (Lynn).

Florens who is shocked by her mother's rejection and displacement does not even cry when a woman steals her warm clothes and shoes; and she keeps silent for years. Hence, breaking silence in the form of writing her life story for the Blacksmith is an enormous step toward recovery. But she can never truly recover as the truth is still covered for her and still "mothers nursing greedy babies scare" her, (*Mercy* 6) because it reminds her of her mother choosing her little boy over her. Her silence at the beginning and the thoughts and dreams that follow the incident are the manifestations of what Caruth calls "post-traumatic stress disorder" (4). Dreams, flashbacks and hallucinations seen by traumatized Florens that repeatedly bring her back to her sad moment in life have stemmed from the question that looks for an answer, the enigma that needs truth. Therefore, central to interpret her dreams is the crisis of separation from her mother against her will, and being left with no explanation with the history that she doesn't want it to be her story. The reason for the abandonment that continues to haunt Florens and remains as the only sadness for her, finally gets unveiled, although not for her but for the reader, when *a tua mãe* narrates her story:

Neither one will want your brother. I know their tastes. Breasts provide the pleasure more than simpler things. You are raising too soon, . . . And they see and I see them see... There was no protection. None. Certainly

not with your vice for shoes. It was as though you were hurrying up
your breasts and hurrying also the lips of an old married couple.
(*Mercy* 160)

Florens' mother finds her voice by the end of the novel to fill in the communication gap and to tell her story and the strong reason of her act; and in this way seeks the cure for her injuries. She doesn't want Florens to listen, but to hear and understand her in the situation as a mother and her love for her. The novel ends with her voice: "oh Florens. My love. Hear a tua mãe" (*Mercy* 165). The blacksmith's definition of slavery adds a new perspective to the novel. He assumes "slaves freer than free men" and that "the one [slave] is a lion in the skin of an ass. The other is an ass in the skin of a lion" (*Mercy* 158). His notion of freedom can be interpreted as not being slave in mind, to be free from the boundaries that control your body, not getting effected with forces that want to change you, with the bender wants to bend you, even when are you considered as "other" and "lesser people" at the time racial discrimination has reached to the extent that in white people psyche "Natives and Africans instance, had access to grace but not to Heaven- a heaven they knew as intimately as they knew their own gardens" (*Mercy* 97). His definition contradicts Lina's perception of life. "We never shape the world she says. The world shapes us" (*Mercy* 69). Florens who has never known freedom from slavery, mistakes it with looseness, but as she moves toward self-realization through the journey of abandonment by her mother and later rejection by the free black man adds to his words, saying that "still, there is another thing. A lion who thinks his mane is all. A she-lion who does not" (*Mercy* 158). Her word shows that although she has not recovered from trauma (represented in her final words addressed to her mother: "Mae, you can have pleasure now because the soles of my feet are hard as cypress"), she has reached to a state of self-consciousness and is able to survive and to gain control over her life and future. "I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. No ruth, my love. None. Hear me? Slave. Free. I last" (*Mercy* 159).

Choosing the vast theme of slavery, Morrison says "to enter into that arena just seemed to me like entering into the Atlantic Ocean in a tiny little raft" (Norris); still she picks this as the theme of several works and by the means of skilful narration, she uncovers the multidimensional aspects of the miserable life of "sixty million and more" tortured souls under the oppression of the most inhumanly practice ever: when "grown men whipped like children; children whipped like adults; black women raped by the crew [white people], . . . but human blood cooked in a lynch fire was a whole other thing" (*Beloved*, epigraph 180). She reveals African American experience when "a slave assaulted a white man a second time", was legitimate to have "the facial brand required by local law" (*Mercy* 20). The traumatized African Americans then in order to survive found their relief in telling each other their stories and singing their songs.

In the nightmare. / *Mercy*. / In the darkness. / *Mercy*.

In the morning. / *Mercy*. / At my bedside. / *Mercy*.

On my knees now. / *Mercy*. *Mercy*. *Mercy*. *Mercy*. (Song 317-18)

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On Rakhshabandhan

- Sunil Sharma

Sorry Sister,
This Rakshabandhan
I will not be coming home,
But sending my gifts
To a sister
That means a lot,
The humble gifts
Are from a little brother
Who remembers you often
And cries a lot
In the dark,
They are
The symbols
Of my love
Sent
Through a lucky pal
Returning
To the village home
That I remember not,
You do not worry, Sis,
Next year I sure will
Return,
These days I work in a gloomy
Zari shop,

Weaving intricate patterns on these
sarees
For the rich
Driving big cars,
I weave
With the raw
Passion
Of my eight-year-old
Tender heart,
Often thinking
During this break-breaking ten-
twelve-hour
Daily job,
Once I grow up
And survive the doomed dungeon,
I will gift a finely-woven
Zari saree
To my elder sister,
Who
Is
Our poor family's
Only
Sweet heart.