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MORRISON'S A MERCY: A NARRATIVE OF BLACK MOTHERHOOD

RAJENDRA PRASAD BHATT

Research scholar, Tribhuvan University

Kathmandu, Nepal



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Abstract

This paper attempts to explore the notion of motherhood in Toni Morrison's novel, *A Mercy* (2008). Morrison, the Noble laureate, depicts the experiences of black women and their suffering through her literary creations. As a renowned story teller and reformer, she uses powerful vocabulary to paint the burning societal issues of the enslavement of Africans. Utilizing the narrative inquiry approach, the emphasis of this study is on Black mother and the assertive deeds she performs to cope with the challenges of hopeless slavery. Through the portrayal of an unconventional mother figure Minha Mae and her painful experiences, Morrison demonstrates how slavery warped and shaped motherhood, and reveals the circumstances that separate mother and children both physically and emotionally. She challenges the traditional notion of motherhood and develops a view of black motherhood that is, in terms of both maternal identity and role, radically different from motherhood as practiced and prescribed in the dominant culture.

Keywords: motherhood, enslavement, racism, sexism, slavery

Introduction:

Mothers play a crucial role in the growth and development of the society. They always try to cope with the challenges of motherhood along with society's expectations as to what a mother's relationship should be with her children. Reflecting on the inseparable and unique bond between mother and child, Agatha Christie, in *The Hound of Death and Other Stories*, asserts, "A mother's love for her child is like nothing else in the world. It knows no law, no pity, it dares all things and crushes down remorselessly all that stands in its path"(79). Christie reveals the limitless possibilities of mother-child unique bound. Toni Morrison has retraced narratives of women with the background of motherly love and responsibility. The mother-child deep attachment is central to Morrison's novel *A Mercy*. It narrates a tale of an enslaved mother, Minha Mae, who, in order to save her daughter,

Florens from being sexually abused by her slave master, gives up to another white slaveholder whom she views as less likely to be abusive. Florens, a 16 years old girl and the narrator, lives in a Portuguese slave owner D'Ortega's plantation. The plot set in 1680s when the slave trade in America was still in its infancy. Jacob Vaark, an Anglo-Dutch trader and adventure, has a small business in the harsh North. Despite his distaste for dealing in "flesh," he takes a small slave girl, Florens, as a part of payment for a bad debt from a plantation owner in Catholic Maryland. Florens, rejected by her mother, looks for love, first from Lina, an older servant woman at her new master's house, and later from the handsome blacksmith, an African, never enslaved.

Analysis:

A Mercy depicts the life and circumstances of a slave mother, Minha Mae. She works for D'Ortega, a Portuguese slave owner and a

businessman. Minha Mae has a daughter and a son. The daughter's name is Florens. The novel revolves around Florens. Florens and her mother, Minha Mae initially belong to D'Ortega, a Portuguese slave owner, who owes money to Jacob, a tradesman. When Jacob goes to D'Ortega's plantation to receive his payment, D'Ortega asks Jacob to take a slave as payment. Jacob feels hesitant because he believes that slaves are not goods. As the narrative reveals, "Flesh was not his commodity" (21). When D'Ortega requests him again and again, Jacob agrees and looks at the slaves. After surveying a line of more than twenty slaves, Jacob chooses a woman, Minha Mae who has two children, a daughter and a son. To his shock, she offers her daughter Florens and begs, "Please, Senhor. Not me. Take my daughter. Not me" (26). Minha Mae's experience reflects the confining contradictions imposed on black mothers during slavery. Regarding the condition of black mother in American society, Angela Davis, in *Women, Race and Class*, views that Morrison's novels "problematize the mother, rather than romanticize her" (145). Davis opines that Morrison's narratives expose the situation and circumstances that black mothers face in a racist society. The unavoidable circumstances often problematize them as it happens in the case of Minha Mae, who requests a slave owner to take away her daughter.

Maternal love and its articulation often seem difficult to comprehend, especially when a mother is left with no choice except to push her daughter to a lesser degree of evil. When the woman offers her own daughter to be taken away, Jacob gets surprised. He cannot understand the real concern, which is born out of a mother's fear and helplessness. Thinking that the daughter is an "ill-shod child that the mother was throwing away" (34), he readily accepts the deal. Jacob accepts the mother's proposal because he believes that Florens can be a good companion for his wife Rebekka's loneliness. In this way, Florens joins Lina and Sorrow, and stays as a servant in Jacob's house.

Morrison exposes how maternal love is difficult to understand through Minha Mae's decision to offer her daughter to a tradesman, Jacob. Desperate to save her daughter Florens from "the lips of an old married couple" (160), she requests

Jacob to take Florens because she knows there is "no protection" (161) for slaves, especially female, whose bodies belong to the masters. In this line of argument, Harriet Anna Jacobs, in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* asserts, "Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women"(86). Minha Mae is well aware about the dehumanization of hopeless slavery, therefore, she does this to push her daughter to a lesser degree of evil in an attempt to save her from higher degree of oppression and sexual harassment. The invisible bond between them is shown inexplicitly.

The narrative highlights the positive aspects of motherhood. It demonstrates mother child relation with a new dimension, which cannot be explained under the traditional notions or conventions. Describing marginality, a site of deprivation, as a site of resistance, hooks, in *Feminism for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, argues that "marginality [can be seen] as much more than a site of deprivation...it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance...a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one's capacity to resist" (150). hooks reveals marginality status of black women, which deprives them from gaining their rights is also a sight of resistant because it promotes black women's capacity to resist. In order to challenge and deny their victimized and marginalized state, black women, like Minha Mae resist the dominating practices by loving their children to claim their natural rights as mothers.

Minha Mae justifies her maternal concern to her daughter. She is confident of her justifications. She thinks that if she tells her daughter Florens the truth of the possible horrible consequences of her staying with her mother, she will be convinced. Justifying her decision, she explains to her:

You stood there in those shoes and the tall man laughed and said he would take me to close the debt. I knew Senhor would not allow it. I said you. Take you, my daughter. Because I saw the tall man see 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. I stayed on my knees. (166-7)

Minha Mae tells her daughter Florens about her motherly concern. She makes a request to Jacob Vaark to take her (Florens) away from D'Ortega's plantation to save her from sexual abuse because she thinks Jacob as a human child and merciful to his servants. Minha mae desires to keep Florens with herself. But she is afraid of Florens' security when she sees the lust for her daughter in the master's eyes. She does not like her daughter to face the challenges of slavery and lead the life of a helpless woman as she herself has experienced. She tells her: "One chance, I thought. There is no protection, but there is difference" (166). Minha Mae sees in Jacob the only chance for Florens to escape from D'Ortega.

As a responsible mother, she makes efforts to secure a better future for her daughter Florens. She experiences the dilemma many mothers face in slavery. Reflecting on the brutality of racist society on the Blacks, hooks opines, "In the midst of a brutal racist system, which did not value black life, [the slave mother] valued the life of her child enough to resist the system"(144). Hooks believes that brutal racist system does not value blacks. It is the responsibility of a black mother to value the life of her children. This idea is well exemplified in Fredrick Douglass's autobiographical work *The Narrative of Fredrick Douglass*. In the description of his own mother Douglass writes that his mother used to walk twelve miles at night, whenever possible, to embrace her son once. It also seems valid here because Florens' mother Minha Mae transgresses all set boundaries to give a less dehumanized life to her daughter. She refuses the role of a helpless mother. She tries her best to save her daughter's life from slavery and oppression.

In this novel Morrison describes and places motherhood as a site of power. Regarding black women's experiences and perspectives on motherhood, Andrea O' Reilly, in *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart* explicates, "Building upon black women's experiences of, and perspectives on motherhood, Morrison develops a view of black motherhood that is, in terms of both maternal identity and role, radically different than

the motherhood practiced and prescribed in the dominant culture"(1). O' Reilly argues that black women's experiences and perspectives on motherhood represent a different maternal identity. And the roles they play are also different from the role prescribed for mothers in dominant culture. Her argument supports Minha Mae's position as a mother and explains how she resolves the situation. As a caring and sensitive mother she sacrifices the maternal bonds and gives her daughter in the hands of another slave owner whom she thinks less abusive. Morrison's viewpoint on motherhood enables black women to resort to the negative conceptions of femininity by reshaping and rearticulating the powers inherent in black women.

A Mercy portrays Minha Mae a perfect mother because she chooses to distance herself from her daughter to provide her a better life. As an experienced woman she reads the mentality of Jacob and requests him to accept her daughter instead of money. Florens keeps this thing within her heart, which she discloses later in life and expresses through her behavior with her rivals. She is about eight years old when Florens is exchanged for money to Jacob. She cannot understand her mother's notion of not offering the son as a slave, and remembers with innocent sorrow. As she narrates:

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. Sir agrees and changes the balance due. (8)

When Minha Mae requests Jacob Vaark to accept her daughter, Florens observes all this but cannot understand anything. Minha Mae asks him to take away her daughter instead of her son because she wants to protect her from her cruel master. As Florens' mother tells her, "it was not a miracle- It was a mercy"(167). It is difficult indeed for a little girl of eight years like Florens to understand her mother's act of mercy.

Morrison's description of D'Ortega's property discloses the horrors and dread of slavery in a magnificent home. D'Ortega has a huge farmhouse where slave trade is carried out successfully. D'Ortega does not miss any opportunity to supply slaves. The slaves, who stay there, have difficult lives. Florens recalls about her life in D'Ortega's tobacco plantation under the cruelty of his family. As she describes her life there spending her days, "picking okra and sweeping tobacco sheds", and "nights on the floor of the cookhouse" with her mother, Minha mae (5). Florens says that the life at D'Ortega's plantation was miserable.

Florens' pain and emotions are clearly reflected in the novel. As a young girl she only knows the decision of her mother. She expresses this thing in her words saying, "mothers nursing greedy babies scare me. I know how their eyes go when they choose . . . holding the little boy's hand" (8). Later in life it becomes difficult for Florens to maintain a good relationship with others as she is obsessed with her mother offering her rather than her brother.

Minha Mae clarifies the fact behind offering her daughter to Jacob Vaark when she says to her that the act she has done out of her maternal love is aiming to protect her from the eyes and lust of D'Ortega and his sons. She claims that: "Breasts provide pleasure more than simpler things. Yours are rising too soon and are becoming too irritated by the cloth covering your little girl chest. And they see and I see them see" (189). This all shows the mother's concern to her daughter. Depicting mother's concern to her children, Adrienne Rich, in *Of Women Born*, writes, "Woman did not simply give birth; she made it possible for the child to go on living. Her breasts furnished the first food, but her concern for the child led her beyond that one to one relationship"(101). Rich argues that women are not only the creator of life, they are protectors, too. The mother knows that D'Ortega's plantation is a burial chamber to Florens and other slaves. At Jacob's farm, they are humanly treated and live like sisters under the protection of Jacob. It is not only Florens who lives there at the mercy of Jacob Vaark but there are other slaves too.

Being grown without her mother's love, Florens feels the loss of support. Her mind wavers between the past and her present. The past is filled with her mother's memories whereas she has no space in her present life. At times she shows abnormal behavior. It is difficult for her to tolerate the pain of her mother offering her to Jacob. Florens desires to love and likes to be loved. Her relation with Lina and Sorrow, the other slaves at Jacob's home, cannot fulfill it. She also develops her relation with the blacksmith but it doesn't turn to intimacy. She finds Jacob's house as a haven which protects her from oppression and physical abuse. Little Florens tries to live up to everyone's expectations at Jacob's house because she is scared that they will abandon her as her mother did. It is difficult for her to understand the deep love and attachment of her mother, who offers her to Jacob Vaark to save her from sexual abuse and violence.

As a woman sexually abused by her master, Florens' mother, Minha mae understands that the woman in slavery has no protection. As the narrative reveals, "To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below" (193). When she sees that the tall man, Jacob Vaark, sees Florens "as a human child" (195), she chooses to give him her child because there "was no animal" in his heart (191). Florens never understands her mother's deep attachment to her and never treats this 'separation' as a mercy. She is tortured by the agony of abandonment all over her life.

The novel explores the black slave mother's identity in America by spinning the tale of abandoned child and helpless mother. It is intended to speak for those suffering mothers who, throughout history, are deprived of their voices. A *Mercy* is set in a time before racism has been established as grounds for slavery. It is the period before, as Morrison states, "slavery and black became married." Morrison vividly describes how discrimination such as racial, cultural, and gender affects Black women. Describing Morrison's skill of narrating stories, Shirley A. Stave and Justine Tally, in *Toni Morrison's A Mercy: Critical Approaches*, explain, Morrison does it in a manner that reflects, "an interface with cultural artifacts and foundational

myths" (1). The novel centers on the theme of ecstasy and agony of the Black mother.

A Mercy highlights the positive aspects of motherhood though they do not prove to be totally supportive and selfless. Demanding the need to reformulate the ideas of motherhood, Angela Davies, in *Women, Race, and Class*, expresses that, "greater degree of journeying between patriarchal conceptions of motherhood and women- defined patterns of mothering, in and out of its biological mandates and social constructs"(142). Davies marks the differences between patriarchal conceptions of motherhood and women- defined patterns of mothering and supports women defined pattern of motherhood to make it an empowering experience. This view liberates the institution of motherhood from the patriarchal conceptions of motherhood, which puts women in a strict boundary. This novel deconstructs the traditional image of woman as mother.

Conclusion

The analysis of Morrison's narratives exposes that motherhood is profoundly an act of resistance that signifies itself as essential and intricate to black women's counter response to the operating racism and sexism. Reflecting Morrison's definition of motherhood, Danille K. Taylor-Guthrie, in *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, (Literary Conversations Series), clarifies:

The most liberating thing that ever happened to me . . . Liberating because the demands that children make are not the demands of normal 'other'. . . I could not only be me- whatever that was- but somebody actually needed me to be that. It's different from being a daughter . . . The person that was in me that I liked best was the one my children seemed to want . . . Also you could begin to see the world through their eyes again- which are your eyes. I found that extraordinary. (270-71)

Morrison's view on motherhood contrasts with the predominant image of the mother in the White society, which assumes mothers are ever- bountiful, ever- giving, submissive, and self- sacrificing, who

are never overwhelmed by the demands of their children. Morrison gives the reader an ambivalent but emotionally intense depiction of an unconventional motherhood, in which motherhood is both and alternatively joyous and heartbreaking, a salvation and a sacrifice.

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