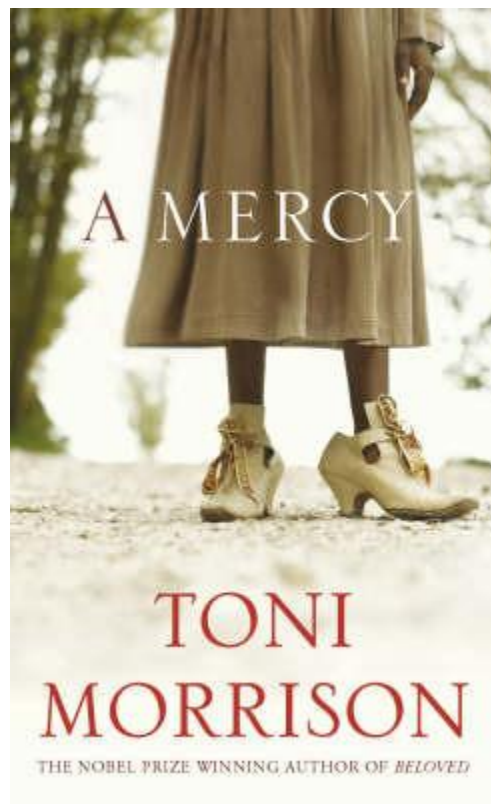

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Perpetuation, Mediation and Annihilation of Oppressions in the Matriarchal and Patriarchal Spaces of Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*

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Abstract

In *A Mercy*, Toni Morrison grapples with the many-sided and impressively influential gothic “haunted” house from little girl Florens’s point of view. Her recurring and touching appearances in the novel are not only individual but they are also indicative of the cultural, political and historical expositions in the Atlantic colonies of the late seventeenth century

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Maryland, Virginia and New York. Morrison investigates the negated subalterns like the individual and familial selves and goes even further from her regular sympathy for the “peripheral existence” of the black people into the consequences of deracination, disruption and “ontological instability” of the native Americans, multiethnic and multiracial slaves and the indentured servants in a territory dominated by the newly established class of people belonging to the “New lands”, America, May 1690, in the novel *A Mercy*. Morrison’s motive is to give a hint on how simple acts of mercy shown by people with power could comfort and provide solace to women under subordination. And hence could act as the source of annihilation against the oppressions of slavery, religion and patriarchy. Alice Walker’s theory of womanism and Kimberle Crenshaw’s intersectionality provides ways to fight the interconnecting oppressions. These theories help in identifying a woman’s forbearing capabilities amidst all odds and also helps to understand the intersections of racism, classism and sexism as well as their effects on people both individually and collectively. Hence, not only does Morrison portray the unexplainable atrocities of American history through *A Mercy*, but she also directs methods for its reconstruction, like women’s liberation and struggle for self-definition and self-expression.

Keywords: Negated subalterns, multiethnic slaves, religion, patriarchy, womanism, intersectionality

Novels of Morrison

The novel *A Mercy* is quite similar to many of Morrison’s other novels like *Song of Solomon*, *Paradise*, *Jazz* and *Love*, where the novels throw light on many women characters in their household. The readers are again exposed to the consequences of a slave mother’s sacrifice in *A Mercy* just the way *Beloved* highlight’s the plight of a slave mother Sethe who had to kill her own baby girl just to save her from the evils of slavery. In comparison with *Love*, *A Mercy* is also another work which showcases the outcome of the protagonist Florens’s very young experience of desertion and loss of her family. But it is a bit different in this novel because unlike Cosey in *Love* who intentionally abandons Heed and Christine, minhamae the mother of Florensin *A Mercy* hands over her daughter to the slave owner, Jacob Vaark only as an expression

of true love as she does not want Florensto be sexually abused just the way she gets abused by her slave owner D'Ortega and his wife.

A Mercy

Morrison's ninth novel, *A Mercy* exposes the lives of a group of people who were bought and combined to stay in a common house with the process of a commercial deal. The household also includes an Anglo-Dutch farmer and his English wife, a Portuguese Catholic plantation owner, indentured servants and a freedman named Blacksmith. During the initial stages of the characters' lives as they live together, the characters live in a peaceful coexistence and are equally dependent of each other for their survival as they strive to make a life out of the uninhabited place they live in. But it is after all the mutual coexistence that greed accompanied by gender, class and race hierarchies pollute the minds, lives and their environment. Basically, greed is symbolically the reason for the farmer Jacob Vaark's death and stands responsible even for the critical turbulence the women who depend upon Vaark face after his death. As Morrison follows the trend of using multiple narrative perspectives in most of her novels, she applies the same technique in this novel as well where the meanings of the narrative can be derived from the interconnections among the different opinions put forth by the characters in the novel. With the intersection of the many different voices and their stories, Morrison investigates the meaning of independence and captivity, religion and power, matriarchal and patriarchal space and the evils of racism, classism and sexism and its effects upon the characters in the novel. As Valerie Smith says, "Like most of Morrison's novels, *A Mercy* is told from multiple narrative perspectives; the meanings of the narrative emerge out of the interconnections among the different points of view." (Smith 118) And thereby, in doing so the narrative style of the novel *A Mercy* dissents the ideas and hierarchies that are the causes for Vaark's death and destruction of his family and house. The work's narrative structure intimidates Florens's, Lina's, Mistress's and Sorrow's identity and security as women and female slaves.

Theories of Womanism and Intersectionality

Alice Walker's theory of Womanism and Kimberle Crenshaw's Intersectionality helps in identifying a woman's forbearing capabilities amidst all odds as well as the different

interconnecting systems of oppressions that afflict the lives of the women slaves in the novel. In spite of the fact that Florens is the protagonist of the novel, the stories of the many other women in the novel is representative of the cultural, political and historical phase of the 1690's Maryland, Virginia and New York. The girl Messalina, shortly called Lina is the first girl hired by Jacob Vaark to work on his estate. She is a young Native woman deserted by her family at the early years of her life when the plague took the lives of most of her family members. Vaark buys Lina from the Presbyterians who tried to make her "religious" with the hope that she would be able to help him run his farm when he initially had no one to help him. After Lina, Vaark buys a wife named Rebekka from her family who lived in London for he believed that he found her to be "an unchurched woman of childbearing age, obedient but not groveling, literate but not proud, independent but nurturing" (M 30). In exchange for all that Rebekka does to manage Vaark's household, Vaark decides to compensate Rebekka's parents for any of her personal needs. Thirdly, the farmer accepts a girl of unknown racial background, literally known and called as Sorrow from a sawyer who had to give Vaark some money. Symbolic of her name, Sorrow is a depressed girl who communicates with her alter ego, Twin, as she does not know of any other way through which she could erase the deep wound of a trauma she had to face as she lived with a captain known to be her father. Having met with a shipwreck she later survived that phase only because a sawyer out of his mercy saved her and brought her into his home. Even here Sorrow has no security and is abandoned by the sawyer's family. The sawyer's wife throws Sorrow out of her house when she gets to know that the Sawyer's sons abuse her sexually. The other servants at Jacob Vaark's household are Willard and Scully, the two white men who work for Jacob, these two men were also deserted by their family and therefore subjected to serve. The novel begins right before Jacob comes to meet D' Ortega for some commercial deal and it is at D' Ortega's place where Vaark meets Florens.

First Person Point of View in *A Mercy*

The novel *A Mercy* consist of eleven sections that are intermingled with Floren's first person point of view and the voices of Lina, Jacob, Rebekka, Sorrow, minhamae, Willard and Scully. The novel is narrated in the first person's point of view and follows the present tense. Florens's section explains the significant events that the novel highlights and it goes on further

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to narrate the story of servitude and her journey to find her lover, the blacksmith. The rest of the sections are narrated in a third-person's point of view and seems quite indirect in its expression. At times the tense used in these sections are in past tense and they focus on the characters' past stories, expose Florens's lifeaccount, as a whole the other sections bring out the fact that all the details of the characters' lives are somehow interconnected and hence their narrative accounts unite them into a society. Therefore, Florens's and the perspectives of others such as Jacob, Rebekka, Lina, minhamae, Sorrow, Willard and Scully expose not only their individual life stories but they give an exposure to the cultural, political and historical conditions in the Atlantic colonies of the late seventeenth century.

Matriarchal and Patriarchal Spaces

The perpetuation, mediation and annihilation of the oppressions in the matriarchal and patriarchal spaces of Morrison's *A Mercy* is one of the most pertinent theme that has to be understood. This is so because the exploitations in the matriarchal and patriarchal spaces are different from each other and require different lessons to be learnt in order for the annihilation of the atrocities. Religion and patriarchy dominate both the matriarchal and patriarchal spaces. In the matriarchal space religion and patriarchy dominates the multiethnic women slaves who work at Jacob's household. Again religion and patriarchy is the most natural means of weapon used to exercise power in the patriarchal space as well. D'Ortega and Jacob Vaark's house and the other unnamed men in the novel who use religion as a tool to overrule the lives of women occupy the patriarchal space.

Religion and Power

Power in the form of religion has been used by the Presbyterians to "civilize" Lina and this domination affects Lina in such a way:

That she decided to fortify herself by piecing together scraps of what her mother had taught her before dying in agony. Relying on memory and her own resources, she cobbled together neglected rites, merged Europe medicine with native, scripture with lore, and recalled or invented the hidden meaning of things. Found, in other words, a way to be in the world. (M 46)

Being an orphan, whose family had died during an epidemic disease, Lina was totally desolate and hopeless without family. Having realized this she decided to work for the Presbyterians and hence “let herself be purified by these worthies”. For the Presbyterians taught her things like “to eat corn mush with one’s fingers was perverse” (M 46). In spite of the Godly and religious teachings that the Presbyterians impart to Lina, she is abandoned even by Presbyterians who refuse to keep Lina with them. Lina at this point loses her sense of individuality and her sense of belonging towards herself. It is at this time that Lina’s mother plays the role of the wise matriarchal mother who influences her daughter’s state of mind. Lina uses the teachings of her mother which she receives right before she died in pain due to the small pox which attacked her family. Walker’s *In Search of our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose*, and the theory of Womanism that it employs is applicable in the novel when Lina learns to remember and put together the little lessons of life that could help her “fortify” herself during the time when she experiences loneliness that haunts her as a ghost.

Lessons of Life, Memory, Re-memory

With the help of memory, rememory and the resources around her Lina finds on her own ways to exist. Lina mended all the disregarded religious customs and found her own manner of handling life’s situations. The lessons of life that Lina learns from her mother, shows the womanist qualities that Lina’s mother exhibited in trying to teach and pass on to Lina to act as a woman and not as a girl during the battles of life. Lina turns out to be creative as she uses memory “and her own resources” and also uses those things that are usually neglected and not given much importance. And with the neglected things and the new things that she learns from white people’s civilization Lina uses it all to find the mystery of certain things which are confusing. And thereby in doing so she discovers the tactics to exist in an unfair world. Lina had to find such ways to inhale and exhale her life’s plight because: “There was no comfort or place for her in the village; Sir was there and not there” (M 46). Lina had to associate herself with the pious Presbyterians only so that she could find some solace and company with them. Here, Morrison is quite cynical about religion and its manipulation, she also criticizes the effects it causes to the people who follow it. This can be seen in the lines “Solitude would have crushed

her had she not fallen into hermit skills and become one more thing that moved in the natural world” (M 46).

Florens, the Protagonist

In the early part of the novel, the readers are introduced to Florens, the protagonist of the novel. The protagonist a sixteen year old girl, writes her life stories on the walls, ceiling and floor of the room at the mansion of her late master. This mansion is the home she is not permitted to enter. The manner Florens expresses herself is like a “project” since she gives details of her own harsh attitude towards Malaik, a young child who belonged to the blacksmith, the former lover of Florens. It is obvious in the later part of the novel that as Florens inscribes the events that caused her to break the child’s shoulder, she in a way appropriates her individual right to express her identity and thoughts as a womanist would do. Alice Walker opines her view regarding a womanist:

Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or willful behavior.
Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one.
Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up.
Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.”
Responsible. In charge. Serious. (Walker 10)

Just as a womanist would dare to dive into any circumstance no matter how hard the situation is even so Florens musters up her courage to inscribe on the walls and floors of the house that is forbidden for her to enter. She is able to express herself even when restrictions are enforced on her. Hence, as Walker says in her fourth definition of her womanist theory that a womanist “loves struggle” likewise Florens is audacious enough to be expressive of her thoughts and actions even when she is legally enslaved. The significance of literacy is stressed through Florens’s ability to read. The slaves were forbidden to learn to read or write and in spite of this restriction Florens manages to master the skills of reading and writing and these skills in return help her define the significance and the meaning of her existence. In being able to assert the meaning of her existence Florens learns the art of survival by using her abilities to understand many other mysterious situations around her.

Womanist Tenets

Walker's first womanist tenet highlights the womanist who wants to learn and acquire knowledge. "Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up" (Walker 11). This same thirst for knowledge that is more than required for a young woman like Florens can be compared to the womanist qualities Walker insists the African-American women to inculcate in their everyday lives. In *A Mercy*, Florens is able to understand and interpret the supernatural signs like the dreams she dreams of her mother Minhamae and her little son. Florens also knows to explain weird signs such as the shape of a dog's profile in the steam coming from a kettle and Florens's interpretation of this sign is that the dog's profile warn her of any possible danger. Florens's ability to interpret the wilderness and the natural environment could be observed in the following lines:

Remember? How when they move their pelts sway as though there is nothing underneath? Their smell belying their beauty, their eyes knowing us from when we are beasts also. You telling me that is why it is fatal to look them in the eye. They will approach, run to us to love and play which we misread and give back fear and anger. (M 34)

Psychically Free

This audacity exposes the fact that Florens is "psychically free". And above all, because a womanist "loves herself" she strives hard to find some means to communicate herself to the society in order to be accepted and understood by the community around her. Though Florens is an orphan separated by her mother at an early age and adopted by Jacob Vaark to work for the whites as a slave, she is still mentally strong and outrageous in her approach therefore proving that she was "acting womanish" and like a woman who is "Responsible. In charge. Serious."

The other form of exploitation that Florens faces is the domination exerted by her mother Minhamae as she takes her right as a mother to submit her little girl in the hands of the slave owner Jacob Vaark. And this act comes from the matriarchal space. Morrison has observed that even women who possess natural tendencies to nurture, love and care for each other as human

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beings could go to the extent of giving up their own children especially their daughters in the hands of the slave masters who were more merciful than to the other abusive white masters. This act of abandonment can be considered as the matriarch's power over her family and children. It was totally the woman's responsibility to be in charge of her children. The man did not have any responsibilities and did not bother to take care of his family or his children no matter how small or big his family was. It was in such times that the women took their right to claim their matriarchal space. The act of abandonment by the slave mother minhamae is evident in the following lines, "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 minhamae 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" (M 8). This particular moment when Florens is given away and separated from her mother causes traumatic effects in Florens's mind that she is unable to forget the act of abandonment by her own mother. It is this loss at the early stage of her childhood that creates passion for blacksmith's affection, whom she considers to be her first lover. Also, it is this domination as exercised by minhamae that triggers Florens to act violently towards Malaik. This passage from the novel *A Mercy* also portrays how the female slaves identify their vulnerability as women when they lose their security, identity and freedom by the male patriarchal slavery and religion. The above quote from the novel, where minhamae offers her daughter to subordination under white patriarchy helps to figure out Lina and Florens's adeptness to grasp the codes of supremacy under which they are forced to live. The word "Me" which is repeated twice in the quote stresses that Florens is skeptic about the fact that her mother herself would disown her. This crucial act remain as the prime reason for who Florens becomes later on in her adult life. There is a rational motive behind the use of present tense in the narrative technique used by Morrison. It is so because all the characters's "pasts remain the present". Even among the many differences in the ethnicity, race and gender, the lives of the slave women and the indentured servants are specially interconnected with each other. And it is because of this interconnection that Lina and Florens are able to sympathize and empathize with each other's identities and drawbacks as slaves. Kimberle Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality can be very much applicable in understanding the lives of Florens, Lina and minhamae.

Perpetuating Oppression

The different manners through which oppressions are perpetuated, mediated and annihilated in the patriarchal space is by the domination exercised by religion and patriarchy over the multiethnic women slaves in *A Mercy*. The Reverend Father teaches Florens to read and write with the help of the Nicene Creed and many other holy books and in doing so he aids Florens to achieve her individuality and creative freedom. As a matter of fact, the Reverend does not realize that he has taught Florens to suit herself to the situations around her that were crippling her sense of selfhood and independence. This act as committed by Reverend gets him involved with the practice of supremacy over Florens. The protagonist fails to attain comfort and peace in religion because even when the Reverend tries to pacify and encourage Florens with promises that assure her an eternal life, he is not able to keep her safe from D'Ortega's.

Religious Domination

Undeniably, this act of religious domination can be witnessed all through the novel. The so called religious people and communities demonstrate themselves to be people and places that display racist perceptions, brutality and ones that prolong subjugation. Another reason why religion has so much influence over the multiethnic women slaves is because all the people in religious positions were mostly men, and therefore patriarchy claims its power over the women who are supposed to be subservient to them. The Presbyterians who were with Lina for some time force their doubtful ways of 'civilization' on Lina and she in return gets persuaded by them of the feeling that she is guilty of committing many sins. Another character in the novel, Rebekka, the mistress of Jacob Vaark finds no comfort from the Anabaptists when she loses her children. When mistress is saved by blacksmith from smallpox she gets associated with the Anabaptists. But it's only after Rebekka gets closer to the community of Anabaptists that she stops being compassionate towards the black and native women who serve her through thick and thin.

Mercy and Oppression

Annihilation of such oppressions could be practiced when people are more merciful towards the least fortunate ones who do not possess any kind of dominion over others. *A Mercy*

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exposes Morrison's motive on how small acts of mercy shown by people with power can provide confidence and comfort to hopeless women who struggle to find atleast one human being who would be kind to them. One such desolate woman in the novel is minhamae. When Jacob Vaark comes to visit the D'Ortega, minhamae analyses Vaark's disdain for the lavish life the D'Otraga's live. And on observing this she comes to terms with the fact that Jacobs Vaark will be the only slave owner who could keep Florens safe from any form of abuse and thereby could help her attain her sense of freedom. Even if her identity as a mother could be diminished due to her act of abandonment minhamae chooses to use the opportunity to save her little girl. And the reason she gives for the hopes she has in Jacob is because as she explains, "I saw the tall man see you as a human child, not pieces of eight" (M 166). And the most intelligent act minhamae commits is that she does not consider God to be the life saver of Florens at that point but that it is another human being just like her who chose to be merciful towards a little black vulnerable girl.

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