

Racial Slavery in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy***G. Sharmely**

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V.O. Chidambaram College, Thoothukudi**Abstract:**

African American Literature emphasizes mainly on the black people and their culture. Toni Morrison's works provide insights into the complexity of the black community. In Morrison's *A Mercy*, through an act of mercy, the protagonist Florens, a slave, becomes a part of the household of Jacob Vaark, who is a farmer and trader. The household includes Florens, one American slave, one foundling of mixed race and two male indentured servants. These characters though belong to different races undergoes slavery. Morrison, in this novel goes back to the beginning of slavery in America, which is the late seventeenth century, to explore the concepts of freedom and slavery in every man and woman. This paper will focus on the slaves in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* and analyses the experiences of slavery and freedom. It also explores the racial slavery and explains that racism is different from slavery.

Keywords: slavery, racism, African American literature, mercy, black community, subaltern.

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The study of African American history has grown unusually over the last few decades and the debate over the relationship between slavery and racial prejudice has generated tremendous amounts of scholarship. Slavery or Trade in human beings dates from prehistoric times as all ancient civilizations used slaves. There are many famous subaltern writers like Gayathri Spivak, Arundhati Roy and Toni Morrison etc.

Toni Morrison is the most formally sophisticated novelist in the history of African American Literature. She is the first African American woman to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. Her works provide insights into the complexity of the black people. African American Literature emphasizes mainly on the black people and their culture. She arose many sensitive questions in her novels about race and human rights in the society. Her novels show the victimization of black people within the context of a racist social order.

This paper will focus on the slaves in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* and examines the experiences of slavery and freedom. It also explores the racial slavery and explains that racism is different from slavery. The novel portrays the four slaves in the household of Jacob Vaark, who is a farmer and trader. Set in the 1680s, in the early stages of slave trade, *A Mercy* gives voices to the remarkable characters who works in Jacob's household namely a traumatized Native American Lina, whose tribe has been wiped out by smallpox; Florens, the slave girl he reluctantly accepts as payment for a bad loan; the permanently shipwrecked Sorrow, daughter of a sea captain killed in a storm off the coast of the Carolinas and Willard and Scully, the two male indentured servants. These characters though belong to different races undergoes slavery. The novel also features White Native American characters who are working in servitude.

Lina, a Native American is the first woman slave Jacob buys to help him with the farm. She is the only survivor of the plague which killed her entire tribe. Lina's identity seems to be fixed, eventhough she is adored by the Presbyterians who said that Lina works as hard as they do. Lina's attitude towards them is neither rebellion nor submission. She associates with them in a practical way for fear of losing shelter. When she was fourteen year old Jacob bought her from the Presbyterians. He had searched the advertisements posted at the printers in town until he got to "Hardy female, Christianized and capable in all matters domestic available for exchange of goods or specie" (50). She cherishes Florens and becomes her protector and nurturer. She eventually become friend with Rebekka, wife of Vaark and when "the first infant was born, Lina

handled it so tenderly, with such knowing, Rebekka was ashamed of her early fears and pretended she'd never has them" (73).

Lina cares Florens but she mistrusts Sorrow, believing her to be "bad luck in the flesh" (51). Thus Lina is uncensored in her efforts to keep Sorrow at a distance from Florens: "Whenever Sorrow came near, Lina said 'Scat', or sent her on some task that needed doing immediately, all the while making certain everyone else shared the distrust that sparkled in her own eyes" (122).

Sorrow can be said as the prominent example of racial slavery as she is always mistreated racially. When Sorrow delivers her first baby, "Lina wrapped it in a piece of a sacking and set it a-sail in the widest part of the stream and far below the beavers' dam" (121). Lina tells Sorrow that the baby is dead and quickly sets the child off into the river, giving no time for her to react. Sorrow believes that she hears the baby's cry and she suffers from the thought that her baby is drowning. She thinks about "her baby breathing water under Lina's palm to recede" (121). From that point on, Sorrow completely mistrusts Lina and relies even more on her imaginary friend Twin. Sorrow has never set foot on land before. For her, the land "was as foreign to her as ocean was to ship for shore" (115). Upon her arrival to Sir's house, Lina insists on washing her hair always. Sorrow is the only character who is really being treated like an animal. Lina "scrubbed the girl down twice before letting her in the house" (119). Before the child was born, Sorrow's sole companion in the world is her Twin. Moreover Twin is fiercely possessive of Sorrow.

Sorrow is pleased to see the new face, but as she reaches out to touch one of Florens' braids, Twin stops her and shouts "Don't Don't" (122). Nevertheless, on the day of her second delivery, Twin was absent and it was Willard and Scully helped her to deliver the baby. With her complete concentration on her daughter, Twin was gone and "unmissed by the only person who knew her" (132). Sorrow with her baby daughter now "attended routine duties, organizing them among her infant's needs, impervious to the complaints of others" (132). Sorrow renames herself as "Complete" (132) because the birth of her daughter frees her from her past, giving her a new purpose in life.

William Bond and Scully, the two indentured servants worked on Jacob's mansion and assist with the upkeep of his property after his death. Both look forward for their freedom fee at the termination of their indenture contracts. Willard is first sold to a Virginia planter and his "original seven years stretched to twenty to twenty some" (57) because of the mischief he has done which extends his bondage. He is then released to a Wheat Farmer and following two harvests, the wheat succumbed to blast. The owner made a land-for-toil trade with Jacob and Willard has been handed to Jacob. Willard's elevated sense of self is born on the day when he was called as "Mr. Bond" (148) by the African blacksmith, a respectful address that he has not even received from "small children or preachers" (150). His friend Scully is "finishing his deceased mother's contract" (57) by his three years of labour and he does not know how long it will take for his freedom. Scully at the age of twelve is loved and betrayed by an Anglican

curate. Agreeing that Scully was too young to be permanently incorrigible, the elders passed him along to the landowner Jacob.

The protagonist and primary speaker is Florens, who is a literate slave, taught by a priest in defiance of the law. Florens' mother offered her to Vaark, and she lives and works for the next eight years on Vaark's farm. Florens, now aged sixteen, is set out in search of an African blacksmith, a man who has some knowledge of herbal medicines because her mistress Rebekka is affected by smallpox. She is passionately in love with the blacksmith and her journey is a dangerous one. Florens love for the Blacksmith explains the love of a slave on a free man.

Florens is charged with delivering a message to the Blacksmith so that he might turn to her owner and provide some medical relief:

Mistress makes me memorize the way to get to you. I am to board the Ney brothers' wagon in the morning as it travels north on the post road. After one stop at a tavern, the wagon will arrive at the place she calls Hartkill just after midday where I disembark. I am to walk left, westward on the Abenaki trail which I will know by the sapling bent into the earth with one sprout growing skyward. (37-38)

While on her errand to the blacksmith, Florens feels exhausted and she goes to a large house in search of a shelter during the night. Florens explains the incident where she is considered as a witch because of her black colour by the whites. She describes the situation as "I decide to knock on the door of the largest house, the one that will have a servant inside. Moving toward it I look over my shoulder and see a light farther on. It is in the single lit house in the village so I choose to go there" (104). From the inside of the house, comes Widow Ealing. She is hesitant to help Florens and asks her many questions:

Who hath sent you she asks. I say please. I say I am alone. No one sends me. Shelter calls me here. She looks behind me left and right and asks if I have no protection, no companion? I say No Madam. She narrows her eyes and asks if I am of this earth or elsewhere? Her face is hard. I say this earth Madam I know no other. Christian or heathen, she asks. (104-105)

She is very cautious because she lives in a small conservative religious community. She knows that Florens may bother the community but she allows Florens to stay. Florens enters the house and only after eating she notices a girl is also there. The girl gets up and Florens watches her: "She stands then and limps to the table where the lamp burns. Holding it waist high she lifts her skirts. I see dark blood beetling down her legs. In the light pouring over her pale skin her wounds look like live jewels" (106). The Widow tells Florens: "This is my daughter Jane, the Widow says. Those lashed may save her life" (106). Jane suffers the consequences of not being considered human in that restricted religious community because of the shape of her eye. Florens witnesses Jane "holding her face in her hands while the Widow freshens the leg wounds. New strips of blood gleam among the dry ones" (107). Widow Ealing has to make Jane bleed as if to

prove to the community that her daughter is not a demon because it is believed by them that humans only could bleed.

In the morning when the members of the community arrive to the house, they are astonished by Florens' appearance and "one of the women covers her eyes saying God help us. The little girl wails and rocks back and forth" (109). They were disturbed by Florens' blackness. Florens says: "I shout, wait. I shout, please sir. I think they have shock that I can talk. Let me show you my letter I say quieter. It proves I am nobody's minion but my Mistress" (109).

Florens explanation of the events highlights the racist view of the villagers. Jane's mother gets the letter "and offers it but no one touched it. The man orders me to place it on the table" (111). Rebekka has written:

"The signatory of this letter, Mistress Rebekka Vaark of Milton vouches for the female person into whose hands it has been placed. She is owned by me and can be knowne by a burne mark in the palm of her left hand. Allow her the courtesie of safe passage and witherall she may need to complete her errand. Our life, my life, on this earthe depends on her speedy return" (110).

They order Florens and Jane to stay in the house and rush out. Jane decides to ignore the orders given by them and leads Florens away from the village by showing her an escape route. Florens explains: "We come to a stream, dry mostly, muddy elsewhere. Daughter Jane hands me the cloth of eggs. She explains how I am to go" (112). Jane shows her how to get away and gives her food for the journey.

Florens then finally reaches the blacksmith's cabin, her joy and relief at seeing him found no limits. But her feasting joy is interrupted when the blacksmith points to a little boy "a foundling" (134), whom he has adopted. The boy is Malaik whose father is dead and mother unknown. Florens fears as "I worry as the boy steps closer to you. How you offer and he owns your forefinger. As if he is your future. Not me" (134). After the blacksmith departs to heal Rebekka, Florens and the boy are left waiting together, each uncomfortable with the other. Florens becomes restless at the "small creaking" (135) of Malaik, who she knows is watching her: "Eyes big, wondering and cold" (135). Florens believes that she sees hatred in the young boy's eyes.

Florens finds his fingers clinging to the doll. She takes it away and places it on a shelf which is too high for him to reach. The boy begins to cry. She grabs and pulls his arm, cracking his shoulder, which silences him as he faints from shock or pain, with blood dripping from his mouth. Blacksmith returns to his cabin and sees the broken-shouldered, bloody-mouthed Malaik laying mute on the floor. Naturally, the blacksmith's reaction is to protect the boy. Because Florens is the only one being present, he correctly assumes her guilt. When the blacksmith informs her she must leave, Florens feels he is 'killing' her with his choice. Blacksmith, near the end of the novel accuses Florens that she is slave. When Florens says "I am adoring you" (139)

and blacksmith replies “And a slave to that too” (139), blacksmith blames Florens for her subordination to slavery. In the end, Florens is crushed by Blacksmith’s rejection.

In addition to this Florens’ mother also experiences the racial slavery as she is also a slave in the household of Senhor. She says, “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). She subtly explains that Jacob shows respect on her which is not sexually objectifying her. The mother hoped that selling Florens to Jacob would be ‘a mercy’ because “I saw the tall man see you as a human child, not pieces of eight” (168). But Florens experiences this as her mother’s rejection in favour of her boy child. Florens’ mother recounts in detail the rapes in slavery. In fact, as Florens’ mother is sexually abused by Senhor, she is desperate for Jacob to take Florens away from the plantation.

As a black writer, Toni Morrison is fully aware of the agony of the blacks. Obviously, in *A Mercy* Morrison makes us to understand the trials and tribulations of the slaves of America through the characters of Florens, Lina, Sorrow, Willard and Scully. Morrison concludes the novel by firmly asserting that racism is different from slavery.

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