

Revisiting the Idea of Nation in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*: A New Historical Reading

ARPITA SAWHNEY

Assistant Professor
Dyal Singh College
Karnal, India

Abstract

Toni Morrison's A Mercy is set in the late seventeenth century, taking us back to the beginning of slavery in America. It depicts a period during which America, contrary to general imagination, was way more diverse, multi-layered and complex. Morrison's interest lies in the time before America became a nation, when the New World was still "ad hoc" and was being fought over by various European powers. This prompted her to delve deep into the history of the early seventeenth century and deconstruct the metanarrative of the idea of America as a nation.

Keywords: New Historicism, deconstruction, racism, slavery, metanarrative, national identity

Published in 2008, Morrison's ninth novel *A Mercy*, joins her distinguished oeuvre which explores the African American experiences of slavery and freedom. *A Mercy*, however deals with these issues in a more multifaceted way than her previous novels. The novel is set in the late seventeenth century, taking us back to the beginning of slavery in America. It depicts a period during which America, contrary to general imagination, was way more diverse, multi-layered and complex. Morrison weaves a rich tapestry of characters in the novel including, Dutch, English, Portuguese, Native American, African as well as characters of mixed race, all contesting for a place in the New World. Many of these characters represent a different kind of servitude existing in those times.

Set in the late seventeenth century, when America's reliance on servitude as an economic engine was in its initial phase, *A Mercy* inspects the consequences of desperate act of a slave mother. In payment for her master's debt, she offers her little daughter to a complete stranger. The book offers a fascinating look at America in its earliest days. Morrison makes the reader glide through the intriguing corridors of American history, taking him back to the New World of the early Seventeenth century.

A non-linear narrative, *A Mercy* is told through multiple perspectives. The sensitive period which Morrison chooses to explore cannot be satisfactorily represented or historicized from the limited perspective of a single history, story, or voice. Morrison tries to move us as far back as possible to a time, in the 1680s, where land ownership in America was continuously changing, with colonial powers contesting not only against native tribes but also one another for possession of land. Diseases such as measles and smallpox run rampant. Religious freedom or religious tolerance are rarely found. The Southern colonies are evidently the strongholds of slavery while the North cannot be seen as a blameless bystander. Nonetheless, we find an Eden-like quality in the beauty and richness of this new world, along with many virtues that overshadow the evil elements.

Morrison explains in an interview about *A Mercy*, how her interest in the time before America became a nation, when the New World was still "ad hoc" and was being fought over by various European powers—prompted her to delve deep into the early seventeenth century. This marks a shift from old historical perspective in which the ideas of truth and progress constitute the primary matrix of historical narratives. History has been professed to be objective and factual. This tendency of a monochromatic historical account has dominated the prevailing modes of history writing. Nonica Datta remarks about the insularity of history as a discipline in her article "Fixing Histories":

The multitude of memory and history is silenced through a selective process of remembering and forgetting.... The political, historical and intellectual frameworks converge to destroy an interplay of memory and history, merely using the archival and selective history and memory. Different versions are resolutely frowned upon. (Datta 7)

Morrison tries to blur the sharp boundaries between history and fiction. *A Mercy* can be examined through the lens of New Historicism. The

American historian and theorist Hayden White, in his path-breaking work entitled *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973), asserts that history and fiction have much in common. He argues that they both employ narrative devices to construct a verbal image of reality.

Wide-ranging factors like linguistic constraints, ideological assumptions and representational strategies play an instrumental role in what we perceive as history. Morrison, through her historical fiction, offers such modes of envisaging and interpreting history which are both interrogative and disruptive. Such an endeavour helps to include and centralize hitherto marginalized and suppressed voices, evincing and bringing to fore alternate structures of discourse.

The novel delicately explores the lives of the indentured labourers, labour force of expropriated European constituencies, and the African slaves who collectively constituted the multilingual, intercultural and multi-ethnic masses that stepped into the New World. In spite of their varied origins, what bound these migrants were similar conditions of enslavement and oppression long before the policies and institutions of racism brutally divided them into the white Christians and the naturally degraded Africans. The novel counterwrites the history of a section of people having varied and often opposite cultural, ethnic, religious, and racial origins pushed into the New World by the forces of modernity such as the slave trade, colonization and capitalism. Though contrasting in nature, yet these narratives overlap one another.

Alun Munslow observes in *Deconstructing History*:

There is no more history in the traditional realist sense, there are only possible narrative representations in, and of, the past, and none can claim to know the past as it actually was. (18)

The discourse of the genesis of a national identity— national histories, documents, and discourses—has always subjugated or misrepresented these communities. Their identity as an alterity has always been put into the darkness of oblivion.

The histories of these communities have been represented in negative tropes, as inferior others of religious, class, ethnic, racial, and gender identities. The national subject is always created through the opacity of the discourses of American exceptionalism. Morrison's *A Mercy* presents the story of this diverse community which is formed by

interdependency and brotherhood as much as by conflict, contradiction, and inequalities.

Through her fictional constructs and recovery of memory, she revisits the remains of history, "to a site to see what remains were left" (Tally 81). By revisiting and reinventing the repressed culture including music, folktales, and aesthetics of these communities, she presents the process by which these communities came into contact with each other and played an important role in forming the real national identity. The syncretic identity of the nation which is based on multiple voices, cultures and identities are recovered by revisiting the historical narratives in the novel.

Morrison also expands the reader's view on the definition of a home and a family. She shows how they are not limited to not only ties of blood or marriage, but these are created out of need and love. Most importantly, large and small acts of compassion and humanity run through the story, showing that it is, in fact, our mercy to one another that rescues us more than God's mercy.

Owning labour of people was not unusual in the world. All human civilizations flourished upon some sort of slavery. The unusual thing was coupling servitude with racism. Morrison, in taking us to the times where slavery was in its infant stage, compels us to think how it all began.

Due to the multifarious perspectives, it is difficult to identify where precisely *A Mercy* begins. One possible opening might be when we are introduced to Jacob Vaark, a farmer and trader from New England. He visits Maryland to settle a debt with the plantation owner and slave trader D'Ortega, bringing back with him, Florens, the little black female protagonist.

While narrating Vaark's journey to Maryland, Morrison describes the tensed atmosphere at that time and mentions 'the peoples war'. At this point, we witness the blend of history into fiction. The novel is, in fact, a work of historical fiction set in 17th century America. Recreating the historical climate, the novel abounds in references of events of this time period.

Different forms of human slavery, from chattel slavery to indentured servitude, were universal and common in the early period of colonial rule in America. In order to portray the changing racial climate of the late seventeenth century, Morrison especially refers to Bacon's Rebellion, mentioned as 'people's wars' by Vaark. It was a 1676

rebellion carried out by slaves and indentured servants together against the oppressive rule of William Berkeley, the then governor of Virginia. There was this interesting mix of slaves, the free blacks, indentured servants and wealthy who seemed to have the same purpose. The rebellion, led by colonist Nathaniel Bacon, was eventually suppressed. However, the alliance between slaves (most of them being black) and indentured labour (mainly white Europeans) troubled the wealthy Virginian landowners, because it displayed the subversive power of a united lower class.

After this powerful uprising, a series of laws called the Virginia Slave Codes of 1705 were instated by the Virginia government. These laws limited the rights of the black population in Virginia. Any white could maim or kill any black or servants and Native Americans without any legal consequences. These laws are generally viewed by historians as an effort by Virginian landowners and officials to support racism and sharpen the racial divide. They wanted to prevent the lower class from unifying across racial lines which posed a serious threat to white landowning power in 1676. Through the novel, Morrison attempts to separate the concept of race from slavery. Thus, we see that *A Mercy* is set during the critical period after Bacon's Rebellion, as racial boundaries started to thicken.

By eliminating manumission, gatherings, travel and bearing arms for black people only; by granting license to any white to kill any black for any reason; by compensating owners for a slave's maiming or death, they separated and protected all whites from all others forever. (Morrison 8)

Morrison vehemently opposes this racial divide which has operated almost throughout the history of the country, a system where people with the same economic interests are divided. It worked because it benefitted landed gentry. It allowed them to divide and conquer.

Through her rich and diverse characterization, she recalls a time period where the subjugated and downtrodden, irrespective of their racial differences, joined hands in the struggles of life. In such a poignant depiction of these characters, she makes us question the white authorities who took away this right of the lower classes to unite in their misery. Lisa M. Logan comments about the novel:

Through overlapping, entangled histories that complicate notions of a simple, coherent past, the novel stages recent transformations in

literary and historical studies, showing both the limits and possibilities of the archive. (194)

Since the book opens in medias res with alternating sections of voices, moving back and forth between characters becomes a must for the reader. He must try to understand their past along with their present challenges, and the relationships they share with one another. The reader finds some pieces of knowledge in each section of the novel before discovering ultimately how the myriad voices merge into a story. Morrison takes us on an enthralling journey to the times where racial boundaries were still blurry and what united individuals was their humanity or needs for emotional security.

Jessica Wells Cantiello remarks:

As Morrison has made clear in interviews, she wants the text to trouble the connection between slavery and African Americans and to show that there was a time in which anyone could be enslaved. She does this through the insertion of a number of characters whose economic and slave statuses disrupt conventional alignments between racial location and relative freedom: Willard and Scully, two white indentured servants, whose indenture seems likely to last until their deaths (Willard is serving out the remaining years of his deceased mother's indenture); Lina, a Native American whom Jacob bought through a newspaper advertisement; and the blacksmith, a free African who has never been enslaved. (170)

The story revolves round the household of the Jacob and Rebekka Vaark, a farming couple. In this house, lives Florens, a little black slave; a Native American slave, one orphan of mixed race, and two male indentured servants. This ensemble of characters randomly come together as one family. A voice is given to each of these characters. By showing living specimens of American individuality and self-sufficiency, the novel asks how one can be an individual in oneself in a make-shift world while at the same being part of a community. The action in the story is framed by Florens' journey, which is both literal and figurative. Vaark who is a trader seems to have a soft spot for orphans and strays.

Being an orphan himself, he understands the plight of orphans of all sorts. He seemingly acquires them to rescue them. He owns a Native American slave, Lina, as well as Sorrow, a half-drowned orphan whom he took in another business deal. The next merciful act is done

towards Florens. Though he himself is a slave owner, Jacob thinks of slavery as a degraded business, and his tender heart makes him a good slave owner in the story. Since he and his wife have no living children, it looks as if much of his love and compassion is spent on his slaves.

Florens talks in first person and present tense which gives her character a sense of immediacy. All the other characters are written in third person and help in moving the story forward. In this way, the reader can pause and look around him and learn about their relationships, to see this interesting collection of orphans who make a life together. Morrison chooses a structure where each story builds on the other. Written in a layered kind of way, the story ties the apparently unlike characters into a close-knit world. Lina and Rebekka are friends, Sorrow can be absorbed in their friendship, even the indentured servants Willard and Scully are liked by them. It is a little society that is created by them amidst the wilderness.

All these servants in Vaark's house lie somewhere between the field of slavery and freedom, in forms of servitude that are not essentially race-based. Sorrow is a mixed-race character and is hardly considered to be black by anyone. However, an unpaid servant, she is always under a threat to be sold away. Lina is a Native American slave while Will and Scully are white indentured servants. Florens is the only slave in the house to be considered black. The African blacksmith has never been a slave.

Morrison, in painting these characters with such sensitivity, shows the power of solidarity against unfavourable circumstances. These characters, with their individuality, whims and shortcomings, are left vulnerable in their lives. But coming together as a close-knit family gives them some sense of security and relief. This right to unite for a common cause being denied to the African-Americans is what annoys Morrison to the core.

Morrison begins with the story of Florens, a slave, owned by Jacob Vaark. As a compensation for his debt, D'Ortega proposes Jacob to take any slave he wants. Though Jacob does not support slavery, he offers to take a female slave who happens to be Florens's mother. In order to save her daughter Florens from the cursed life of rape and abuse she herself has suffered at the hands of D'Ortega, her mother begs Jacob to take her daughter instead. Jacob approves of the idea and D'Ortega arranges to have Florens sent to New England. Florens is at

a loss to understand her mother's reason for leaving her. She feels abandoned, a feeling that continues to haunt her for lifetime.

Vaark's wife Rebekka describes her frightful sea voyage from England to the new world to marry a man she has never met before. Rebekka came to America to marry Jacob after he gives advertisement in England looking for a wife. Her description of the journey with a leap into an unknown future is deeply terrifying. The deaths of their babies are disturbing. In fact, Vaark accepts a Florens from his debtor hoping that her presence will help reduce Rebekka's loneliness.

Vaark is the son of a Dutchman and an Englishwoman. He lost his parents in childhood and grew up in a poorhouse until he ultimately became a runner for a law firm. Fortunately, he became the inheritor of a small piece of land in New England belonging to an unknown uncle. He recounts his travels from New York to Maryland and Virginia, remarking what sensitive role religion played in the culture of the various colonies, in addition to their outlook toward slavery. Jacob marries Rebekka, who travels from Europe to America for this wedding. Though the two are not known previously to each other, Rebekka and Jacob grow to love each other and enjoy a happy marriage. Unfortunately, their blissful married life is hampered by the demise of all of their babies.

Lina is one of the most memorable characters of the book. In a parallel narrative, this Native American woman who is a fellow labourer on Jacob's farm, relates the tale of her survival in a smallpox plague that destroyed her tribe. Through Lina's character, Morrison depicts the cruelty and inhumanity faced by the American natives under colonial rule. After the plague, European soldiers burned down her and gave her to Presbyterians. Despite going to church with them, Lina practices her native rites, customs and healing remedies.

Afraid of once more losing shelter, terrified of being alone in the world without family, Lina acknowledged her status as heathen and let herself be purified by these worthies. She learned that bathing naked in the river was a sin; that plucking cherries from a tree burdened with them was theft...That God hated idleness most of all, so staring off into space to weep for a mother or a playmate was to court damnation. (Morrison 44)

Lina is depicted as a woman who has learned how to survive in a world she was not born into. Lina might be the most self-actualized one of all

the characters in the novel. Her loyalty and dedication to the household is described by Sully not as submission but as “a sense of her own self-worth.” Lina upholds her own Native American beliefs and practices. Her respect for nature allows the reader to see how the New World is being environmentally exploited. Her exceptional strength of character allows Rebekka to prosper and holds together this family of disparate characters in several ways.

Kind Europeans such as her master Jacob puzzle Lina as she has suffered at the hands of other Europeans, which makes her sceptical of these people. For instance, her entire village was annihilated by smallpox and other diseases Europeans brought with them. After her village was wiped out, Lina was sent to live with Presbyterians, who tried to convert her to their religion. She assented for the fear of being alone and without shelter. Nonetheless, they eventually abandoned her. Thereafter, she went to work at the Vaark's farm as an indentured servant.

On Rebekka's arrival on the farm, Lina and Rebekka are initially suspicious of each other. However, they realize soon enough that they need to rely on each other. Soon Sorrow arrives as added help, and the two ladies are united in their shared dismay of Sorrow's incompetence. After Florens arrives on the farm, Lina takes Florens under her wing and almost becomes a surrogate mother to her.

One of the most mysterious characters of the book, however, is Sorrow, a young orphan who works on the Vaark's farm. Characters in the book several times imply that Sorrow is mixed race. There are enough suggestions in the book indicating that Sorrow suffers from some kind of mental disorder or is possessed by evil spirits. No one is aware of Sorrow's exact origins. When she was an adolescent, she was found half drowned by a lumberjack on a beach who took her back to his wife. She maintained absolute silence on her prior life. Subsequently, she was named “Sorrow” by the lumberjack's wife. Sorrow proved to be inept in completing even simple tasks. Thus, the lumberjack sold her to Jacob.

Sorrow revelation of her past life comes in the chapter dedicated to her. She reveals that before being found by the lumberjack, she was a Captain's daughter who had spent all her life on a ship. After surviving a devastating ship wreck alone, Sorrow started hallucinating an imaginary friend who is identical version of herself, Twin. Her isolation makes it difficult for her to relate to other people. She is often

used by men for their own gratification. She even becomes pregnant before coming to the Vaark farm. Her baby, unfortunately, is stillborn and Lina sets it in the river to be carried away. This deeply torments Sorrow who is convinced the baby was alive. The next time she becomes pregnant, Sorrow gives a healthy child. Subsequently, her hallucinations stop, letting her to be more focused and capable. She seeks immense fulfilment in her baby, and with her newly found identity in motherhood, she eventually renames herself "Complete."

Jacob begins to accumulate enough wealth with a dream to build a mansion like D'Ortega's. He gets labourers various places to help in its construction, including Willard and Scully, the indentured servants from the next farm. Both of them, having spent a good deal of their life here, seem to be an integral part of the family.

Willard Bond is an indentured servant at Vaark's farm. He becomes indentured at a young age of fourteen to a Virginia planter, and his indenture, which is should be complete at age twenty-one, is prolonged for various transgressions. Willard's uneasiness with servitude begins at the arrival of the Blacksmith as he must now consider how a black man might be free and paid for his work, while Willard is not. This incident makes the reader understand that freedom and slavery should not be conceived in purely black and white terms.

Willard is in a sexual relationship with Scully. Younger in age than Willard, Scully has led a rougher life, and thinks of him to be a better judge of character than his partner. His mother died a tragic death at the tavern she worked in. He is sold to the Church by a man claiming to be his father. There, he was dishonoured by a curate. Caught in the middle of a sexual act, the curate wrongly blamed Scully. He is sent North by the Church where he has a happy encounter with Willard and they soon become a couple. The eleventh chapter focuses on this homosexual couple, who become an integral part of the Vaark household and feel that it comprises their family, with two parents being the Vaarks; their three sisters, Lina, Florens, and Sorrow; and themselves as helpful sons.

Jacob also orders the construction of an iron fence. For this special purpose appears a blacksmith, who is a free African man. Florens falls in love with the Blacksmith on their first meeting at the Vaark farm. Both of them strike up a love relationship. Lina, who had herself been abused by her lover in the past, warns Florens to be careful. One reason that draws Florens to him is that he is a free man,

though she doesn't understand what it feels like to be free, as she has always been a slave. Yakiv Bystrov and Nataliya Telegina observe about Florens:

She admits she does not want to be free. She is scared of it. She wants to belong, to be taken, owned and ruled. That is what she expects from her lover. Toni Morrison shows that the pre-birth loss of freedom changes the human psyche, making one a slave inside one's mind.

Events take a tragic turn when Jacob falls ill at a time when his dream house is almost ready. Hard times befall the family when the loving Jacob dies followed by Rebekka's illness. Their reliance on each other multiplied manifolds. They just have one another to fall back upon. At this point, the Vaark "family" is in a precarious state, with no one else remaining in the household except for a dying Mistress and few orphaned females.

Scully and Willard dig Jacob's grave when he dies. Both of them also help Sorrow deliver her baby. After Jacob's death, they even help Rebekka to run the farm.

Lina worries what will become of them with no master or mistress. Florens is sent to fetch the blacksmith, who had once saved Sorrow from a similar ailment. Lina, with her motherly instincts, is worried regarding Florens's safety, or the possibility that she won't return. Her return with the blacksmith is crucial because their collective survival depends on it.

After a perilous journey through the woods, Florens finally arrives at the Blacksmith's house. Once he learns about Rebekka's condition, the Blacksmith leaves for the Vaark's farm immediately. He instructs Florens to stay at his cabin to look after Malaik, his adopted child. Florens sees the boy as a major threat as she longs for the Blacksmith's exclusive attention and love. Florens gets paranoid about Malaik's presence which reminds her of her mother choosing her younger brother over her. She fears she might have to go through the same things once again. The blacksmith saves Rebekka but on his return, he finds out that Florens has injured Malaik, though unintentionally. She begs and pleads him but he brutally turns her out. Florens is once again devastated.

On her return, Florens finds out that Rebekka is healed. However, much changes at the Vaark's household. Being left unattended, the farm has grown wild. Rebekka thus hires Willard and

Scully for help. During the absence of Florens, Sorrow delivers her baby, and motherhood leads to tremendous improvement in her mental health. Rebekka turns very religious after facing death from so close and takes refuge in Bible. But she also becomes very mean. She treats Lina brutally, beats up Sorrow, and plans to sell Florens. Apart from this, Florens is also changed. She is moody and wild since the Blacksmith abandoned her, and often ponders over how her mother coldly abandoned her. The protagonist, Florens, is haunted by her mother throughout the narrative. Her mother's apparent prejudice for her baby boy cripples Florens emotionally she sees herself as perpetually unchosen.

They once thought they were a kind of family because together they had carved companionship out of isolation. But the family they imagined they had become was false. Whatever each one loved, sought or escaped, their futures were separate and anyone's guess. (Morrison 148)

Each night she stealthily enters the mansion and carves words into the walls of one room. She says her story hoping that it will be read by the Blacksmith someday only to realize that he cannot read. But venting her feelings out allows her some kind of closure and emotional balance. Florens is not aware of her mother's acute sacrifice. The book opens with Florens' voice recalling how she was abandoned by her mother, and ends with the voice of Florens' mother, who explains that she only wanted to save Florens from the cursed life she had lived herself. Florens never finds out the real reason behind her mother's actions which was nothing other than selfless motherly love. Unfortunately, Florens fails to understand perhaps the most powerful demonstration of love in the story.

I will keep one sadness. That all this time I cannot know what my mother is telling me. Nor can she know what I am wanting to tell her. Mãe, you can have pleasure now because the soles of my feet are hard as cypress. (Morrison 153)

Florens' mother wants to save her daughter from a lifetime of sexual abuse at the hands of D'Ortega. Vaark's arrival at the plantation makes her mother see him as someone who sees a child rather than piece of property. She thus requests him to take Florens with him. "*One chance, I thought. There is no protection but there is difference*". What saves

Florens, though, is not God, but “a mercy” from Vaark. The narrative with her words she wishes her daughter to understand:

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. (Morrison 158)

Bereft of their roots, each character in a way strives to survive in a new and alien environment full of danger and disease. For a considerable period of time, they comprise a peculiar but functioning family unit before finally breaking apart. David Gate comments in the New York Times book review of *A Mercy*:

Everyone in “A Mercy” is damaged; a few, once in a while, find strength to act out of love, or at least out of mercy — that is, when those who have the power to do harm decide not to exercise it. A negative virtue, but perhaps more lasting than love.

Throughout the story, we see that a family is not essentially based on blood or marriage. It is something which is gradually established through sincere efforts, love, and mercy. The novel abounds in acts of mercy, large and small, starting with the mercy that brings Florens to the Vaark household. Vaark shows mercy by taking in the unwanted. The blacksmith too adopts an unwanted child. Lina shows mercy in caring for Florens like a mother. At the end of the novel, as Florens' mother tells her reasons for giving Florens away, Morrison makes clear that it is not a miracle from the heaven bestowed by God she is concerned with. Instead, it was a mercy. “Offered by a human” (Morrison 158).

In this way, Morrison very subtly points out how the metanarrative of white male Anglo-American history has written these communities out of history either by ignoring them or by misrepresentation. S depicts how slavery is not merely a function of race or legal status. She allows us a rare perspective on slavery since its usual historical presentation is inseparably linked with that of race, making us consider the many permutations of slavery. Morrison, thus, deconstructs the discourse of national identity and unravels the politics behind the seemingly natural looking process. She also underlines the values of love, sympathy and mercy which bind a society together despite various differences.

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