

Morrison's Black Feminist Discourse in *A Mercy*

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Abstract

A Mercy is Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison's ninth novel. As a writer and black feminist, Morrison devotes her career to give voice to the silenced, to make the unspeakable things speak and to be heard. She challenged the conventional values imposed on black women by presenting various female characters in her novels. Black women suffer from double oppression, both from gender and race. Through her writings, Morrison endowed black women ways of expressing their pains and sufferings. By releasing their painful past, they can gain their identity and subjectivity. They can finally rebuild and shape themselves. This article explores the black feminist discourse in her novel *A Mercy*.

Keywords

Black Feminism, Cultural Orphan, Enslavement

1. Introduction

Toni Morrison, the first black female writer winning Nobel Prize, devoted her career to the history of African Americans. Her creation infused vitality to post-modern American literature and contributed to a third wave of African American literature. Though there are numerous research books and thesis on Morrison, they only focused on a few of her novels like *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*. As a novelist who never stops her creation, Morrison showed her various cultural stands on different stages. Her earlier novels explored the miserable life of African Americans, especially black females, and uncovered the developing history of African Americans. She insisted that only African American history is the relevant context in her novels. Concerning the connection between different cultures and the relation between the white and the black, her later novels reflect the confusion of cultures, which makes her creation accepted by the whole world. Morrison is not only a novelist, but an editor, literature critics and feminist. This article tries to summarize Morrison's black feminism and explore how it ap-

pears in the novel *A Mercy*. The theoretical basis is her literature reviews: *Unspeakable Things Unspoken: the Afro-American Presence in American Literature* (1989), *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992) and *What Moves at the Margin: Selected Nonfiction* (2008).

2. Definition of Morrison's Black Feminism

First, to rebuild the history of African American. Post modernism is to deconstruct and question things. Many critics denounced that the official history reflected the ideology of the ruling class. According to Morrison, American history recorded by government is the history of white Americans. In her interview with Christina Davis (1988, 142), Morrison said: "There's a great deal of obfuscation and distortion and erasure, so that the presence and the heartbeat of black people has been systematically annihilated in many, many ways and the job of recovery is ours." [1]. In view of the absence of literacy, she can only rebuild their history through black folk songs, stories, legends and black music. That's why her novels are full of magic stories, musical redeems and exotic flavors. Black feminist Barbara Smith published a book named *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men* (1982) reflected the absence of African-American females in history. Black feminist realized that in this kind of society they can only rely on themselves to construct their own identity. Just based on this background, Morrison put forward to rebuild the history of African Americans and elaborated the significance of constructing female identity. There exist gender and racial inequalities. Morrison aims to explore the origin of inequality through the creation and interpretation of literature.

Second, the significance of blackness in American literature. In her book *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison elaborated from a historical perspective why African-Americans were marginalized in the United States. To her, white Americans metaphorically used blackness as a way to show their uniqueness and projected oppression on African Americans for their fear of losing freedom in the New World. In "romancing the shadow", Morrison explains from a historical perspective why African Americans are disparaged and relegated to a marginal position. Because the immigrants from the Old World are poor and oppressed, they seek freedom and wealth in the New World. The fear of repression always haunted them even in the New World. "In order to be free from this fear, they projected it onto the blackness of African Americans, who became the surrogate insecure selves of previously repressed white people." Though blackness is always associated with sin, invisibility, inferiority, it does not mean absence. However, it was always distorted. Africanism is an indispensable element in the definition of Americanness. "The contemplation of this black presence is central to any understanding of our national literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins of the literary imagination." [2]. Therefore, reflection on African-American existence is essential for the understanding of American literature. Blacks should not be in the margin of literature imagination and rejected by the mainstream. They should move from the margin and be a part of literature classics.

Third, to make the unspeakable things heard. The black are repressed, not only deprived of freedom, but also the right of speak. They cannot express themselves, even if they speak, no man will listen. Morrison aims to give voice to them, especially black women, for racially and sexually they suffer double oppression. Black women's voice is silenced by both gender and race. In order to regain their identity, they have to give out their voice first. They are the only person who can fill the vacancy of their history. Her literary career is inspired by "huge silences in literature, things that have never been articulated, printed or imagined and they were the silences about black girls, black women. It was into that area that I stepped and found it to be enormous." (Toni Morrison Wins the Nobel) In her interview with Dandi Russell Morrison expresses her intention to write primarily for women. "I write for black women. We are not addressing the men, as some white female writers do. We are not attacking each other, as both black and white men do. Black women writers look at things in an unforgiving/loving way. They are writing to repossess, re-name, re-own." (Stephanie Li 2010, p. 46) [3]. Black female writers depict their existence in society, the pursuit of self and the desire of dreams in their works, which are regarded as the discourse of proving their existence, resisting racial and gender discrimination.

Morrison's black feminism is to shatter the conventional values imposed by white mainstream society like the pieced mirror in her novels and reshaped the pieces through reentering the history. She wants to give voice to black women, let them speak for themselves, so the main narrators in her novels are always women. To her, "it is crucial to reinscribe the received notion of slavery and history from a black female perspective." (Mori, 1999, p. 23) [4].

3. How It Appears Textually

A Mercy's setting is traced back to the late of 17th century "when the conflation of race and slavery was in its infancy." In an interview, Morrison said she "wanted to separate race from slavery to see what it was like, what it might have been like, to be a slave but without being raced; where your status was being enslaved but there was no application of racial inferiority." (Toni Morrison, 2008) [5]. Slavery and racism were not bound together at the beginning.

This article tries to explore the novel from the perspectives of narration, theme and language. Through these ways Morrison makes the silenced heard and the truth reappeared.

3.1. Narration in *A Mercy*

The story began by the narrator's confession to "you". Later we know the narrator is called Florens, a sixteen-year-old girl, "you" is Blacksmith, her lover, and the confession is inscribed on walls. Like her other novels, Morrison adopted multiple narratives in *A Mercy*. The odd chapters are narrated by Florens in the first person's point of view; the even chapters are narrated by characters in the farm in the third person's point of view. The last chapter is narrated by Florence's mother. The result is showed first, then the truth is disclosed layer by layer.

The main plot related to the name of the novel is a suspense: why the black female slave wanted the stranger who came for debt to take away her eight-year-old daughter? Narration on this plot appears three times throughout this novel. The first is narrated by Florens. "I know it is true because I see it forever and ever. 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 mãe begs no. Her baby boy is still at her breast. Take the girl, she says, my daughter, she says. Me. Me." (Toni, Morrison, 2008. p. 7) [6]. This is recalled by Florens when she was about sixteen years old. Here the present tense is used to show the vividness and clearness of the event. She thought her mother abandoned her, which tortured her all the time.

Then this plot is narrated by Sir Jacob. He recalled his experience of collecting debt in a slave-owner's house. The slave owner can't pay for his debt because he lost a group of slaves on a recent shipwreck. He suggested to repay the debt with slaves. Thought Jacob is a businessman, he disgusted slavery and refused to see slaves as commodities. When he saw Florens, her mother and her younger brother, he felt the lady must be liked by the slave owner and he will not allow Jacob to take her away. As a revenge, he chose this women to solve the debt. Certainly, it was refused by the slave owner. To their astonishment, the woman came forward and begged "Please, Senhor. Not me. Take her. Take my daughter." (p. 26). It is incredible for a mother to ask a stranger to take her daughter away. Jacob accepted the litter girl for two reasons, one is he hoped his wife Rebekka can get some relief for she was in the same age with their daughter who was kicked by a mare and lost her life; another reason is he himself is also an orphan, so he cannot refuse to "rescue an unmoored, unwanted child." (p. 33).

In the last chapter, the mother's voice appeared. She told the reason why she asked a stranger to take her daughter away. In her eyes, the conduct is not a cruel behavior but a mercy. She recalled her bitter experience. She was shipped from Africa, sold and raped. She confided to her daughter: "I don't know who is your father. It was too dark to see any of them. They came at night and took we three including Bess to a curing shed... There is no protection. To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below." (p. 163). She worried her daughter will repeat her fate if she continues to stay there. She wanted Jacob to take her daughter away because she felt Jacob was not like the landlord, "there was no animal in his heart." (p. 163). Though there is no protection from her far away from home, she believes things will be different. Mother does not abandon Florens, she gives up her daughter because of love and protection. "It was not a miracle. Bestowed by God. It was a mercy. Offered by a human" (pp. 166-167).

The same story was narrated by three different persons from different perspectives. Collaging them together, the reader finally finds the truth and gains insight. This also means African Americans, especially female, had to stick the pieced memory together to restore their history facing the absence.

3.2. Theme of *A Mercy*

As to the theme of this novel, Morrison aimed to explore the real origin of enslavement. At 17th century's America, slavery and racism were not bound together. There is white orphan, Indian woman, free black and

white indentures in this novel. By putting them together in a farm, Morrison explored the living conditions of different people, and revealed the essence of slavery.

Four women living in the farm have various fates, but to some extent they are all enslaved and deprived of freedom. They cannot choose their destiny and social position. Just like what Lina said: “We never shape the world she says. The world shapes us.” (p. 71). Lina was the first woman bought by Jacob to the farm. She was not a black woman, but an Indian native. Smallpox extinguished her tribe with she and several survivors left. She worked in the home of white owners and named Lina, which means “a sliver of hope.” (p. 47). She had no origin and tried her best to serve her owner in order not to be alone and homeless. She strengthened herself by religion and pieced belief.

Rebekka was the mailed bride of Jacob from Britain. Her parents married her to Jacob just because they do not need to support her anymore. Rebekka didn’t expect too much to marry a stranger far away her home. On her ship to America, she thought “her prospects were servant, prostitute, wife, and although horrible stories were told about each of those careers, the last one seemed safest.” (pp. 77-78). But her marriage was beyond her expectation, Jacob was kind to her and called her “my northern star”. They are just like two trees. “They leaned on each other root and crown.” (p. 87). But their four children died one by one, and followed by the death of Jacob. The death of her husband left her rootless, no things to lean, to rely on. Without husband, Rebekka cannot live alone, she returned to religion to gain relief. She was cruel to her servants because she thought her husband rejected her. “Refusing to enter the grand house, the one in whose construction she had delighted, seemed to him a punishment not only of herself but of everyone, her dead husband in particular.” (p. 153). She suffered spiritual slavery and hurt people surrounded her.

3.3. Language in *A Mercy*

Florens, another slaved female in the novel, always wanted to please others. She was also slaved in spirit. At the age of sixteen, she fell in love with the blacksmith, who was a free black and hired by Jacob to build his new house. She loved him so much that she took him as “my shaper and my world as well. It is done. No need to choose.” (p. 71). She was willing to be his slave. “It is as though I am loose to do what I choose, the stag, the wall of flowers. I am a little scare of this looseness. Is that how free feels? I don’t like it. I don’t want to be free of you because I am live only with you.” (p. 70). Her love was doomed to a failure because of the inequality in spirits. After Jacob was dead, Florens was sent to look for blacksmith to rescue Rebekka. With great effort, she finally found the blacksmith. He went back to cure Rebekka, left Florens and the little boy he adopted. This scene made her recall something appeared in her dream. “A minha mãe leans at the door holding her little boy’s hand, my shoes in her pocket. As always she is trying to tell me something.” (p. 137). She was afraid of being abandoned again by blacksmith, but it did happen after he returned and found she hurt the little boy because he destroyed her shoes. However, the real reason is she didn’t own herself.

Because you are a slave.

.....

What is your meaning? I am a slave because Sir trades for me.

No. You have become one.

How?

Your head is empty and your body is wild.

I am adoring you.

And a slave to that too.

You alone own me.

Own yourself, woman, and leave us be. You could have killed this child. (p. 141)

Desperately, Florens returned to Jacob’s house. Near the end of the novel, we found most part of the story was Florens’ narration. She engraved her words on the wall of a secret room in Jacob’s new house with a snail. These words were her explanation to blacksmith after their quarrel, which can help the readers to understand the beginning of the novel. “Don’t be afraid. My telling can’t hurt you in spite of what I have done and I promise to lie quietly in the dark—weeping perhaps or occasionally seeing the blood once more—but I will never again unfold my limbs to rise up and bare teeth. I explain. You can think what I tell you a confession, if you like.” (p. 1). To her, writing or engraving was a kind of relief because no one to confide and she also knew no one listened to her. “You won’t read my telling. You read the world but not the letters of talk. You don’t know how to.” (p.

160). Though no one listened and no one understood, she had to make her voice. This is the way for black women to find freedom and true selves.

4. Conclusion

By her novels, Morrison aimed to reconstruct the missing history of African-Americans. Facing the absence and distortion of the native history, as a black feminist, Morrison showed her principles of feminism in her works. Oppressed racially and sexually, black women are marginalized and silenced. In her novels, Morrison finds ways to let them show their feelings. No matter Florence's carving on the walls, Lina's recall of her family or Sorrow's talking to her imagined twin. Morrison endowed black women ways of expressing their pains and sufferings. By releasing their painful past, they can gain their identity and subjectivity. They can finally rebuild and shape themselves.

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