

Trauma Without and Within in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*

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The shock of any trauma, I think changes your life. It's more acute in the beginning and after a little time you settle back to what you were. However it leaves an indelible mark on your psyche. (Lifeson 1)

In Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* each character undergoes the trauma of orphaned childhood. Minha mae, the mother of the protagonist, Florens is an African American purchased by D'Ortega. As Minha mae suffered a lot she wants to save her daughter, Florens and so she gives her to Jacob Vaark. Vaark accepts Florens as part-payment of a debt of her master. As Florens is rejected by her mother, she becomes an orphan. Jacob Vaark, the landowner and the master of Florens is himself an orphan boy. Rebekka, the mistress of Florens is married by Jacob Vaark when she becomes orphan by the rejection of her own father. Lina, the Native American servant of Jacob Vaark becomes an orphan when her tribes die of measles and so she is adopted by Jacob Vaark. In the case of Sorrow, she becomes an orphan when she loses her father in a ship-wreck and escapes as the sole survivor. Sorrow is also purchased by Jacob Vaark. Malaik, another orphan boy is adopted by Blacksmith. Thus all the main characters of this novel suffer the trauma of orphaned childhood.

All the major characters are dispossessed from their 'homeland.' This displacement creates identity-crisis because they are unrecognized in the 'new world.' It makes them wait patiently to get an identity or recognition. In the essay "The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures," Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin write about 'displacement' "A major feature of post-colonial literatures is the concern with place and displacement. It is here that the special post-colonial crisis of identity comes out being: the concern with the development or recovery of an effective identifying relationship between self and place". (7)

The travel of Minha mae to the tobacco plants of the Senhor mirrors her displacement. Florens is displaced when she is taken to Vaark's house and then sent as an errand to find medicine to save her mistress, Rebekka. In her journey she suffers due to identity-crisis, especially during her stay in the house of Widow Ealing.

Jacob Vaark's frequent travel and his parentless condition is yet again another example of displacement. Jacob Vaark gets his identity only in the new land because in his early days he is 'misborn and disowned.' His displacement earns him an identity as a 'landowner' and 'master.' Rebekka, one among the four chosen for domestic service is married to Jacob Vaark. Rebekka's displacement to Vaark's house gives her an identity as 'mistress.' The displacement of Lina is expressed through her conversation with nature: "You and I, this land is our home," she whispered, "but unlike you I am exile here." " (Morrison 57) For Lina, there is an urge for her exile as she is the sole survivor of her whole tribe destroyed by measles.

Being an expatriate one has to depend on the natives for gaining recognition in the host country and thus come in its wake slavery and indentured servants. The condition of the slaves is really gruesome and pathetic which is plainly expressed by Margaret Atwood:

The slaves are motherless, fatherless, deprived of their mates, their children, their kin. It is a world in which people suddenly vanish and are never seen again, not through accident or covert operation or terrorism, but as a matter of everyday legal policy. (Atwood 29)

Slaves are deserted from their families and live in constant danger. In this novel, D'Ortega, the master of *Minha mae* has a lot of slaves who are ill-treated. They are forced to toil and live by their sweat. The condition of these hapless slaves is apparent in their tell-tale appearance:

D'Ortega identifying talents, weakness and possibilities, but silent about the scars, the wounds like misplaced veins tracing their skin. One even had the facial brand required by local law when a slave assaulted a white man a second time. The women's eyes looked shockproof, gazing beyond place and time as though they were not actually there. The men looked at the ground. Except every now and then, when possible, when they thought they were not being evaluated, Jacob could see their quick glances, sideways, wary but, most of all, judging the men who judged them. (Morrison 20)

Indeed, the very looks of slaves express a lot meaning and agony. The scars and wounds of the slaves express their 'angst'. D'Ortega parades all his slaves in front of Jacob Vaark to make him accept a slave from him in partial repayment of his debt. And at last he succeeds with the selling of Florens. This novel also carries some biblical references. Here Florens can be compared with the little maid of Naaman, captain of the king of Syria. Florens helps her mistress to be cured from small pox even as the little maid of Naaman suggested him the way to get relief from his leprosy. And so both Florens and the little maid of Naaman are alike in loyalty by saving the lives of their masters.

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Marginalization is another diasporic feature. It is “the process of relegating a person or minority to an unimportant or powerless position within a society or group.” Yogesh Atal has written the condition of the ‘marginal man’ or ‘the stranger’:

In the earlier literature, the theory of migrant behaviour was heavily influenced by Georg Simmel's concept of ‘*der Fremde*’ (the stranger). Elaborating the concept, Robert E. Park (1928) coined the term ‘marginal man’ for the migrant who becomes a ‘stranger’ to both the worlds – his parent society and the host society. ... ‘The marginal man ... is one whom fate has condemned to live in two societies and in two, not merely different but antagonistic, cultures.’ (Atal 204)

In this novel Sorrow is marginalized by others for being female, slave and aboriginal. She can be compared with Rita Joe, the protagonist of George Ryga's *The Ecstasy of Rita Joe*. Rita Joe is marginalized for being poor, female and aboriginal and her only comfort is Jaimie Paul. Likewise Sorrow's comfort is Willard and Scully. Sorrow is marginalized by women such as sawyer's wife, Rebekka, and Lina. But she gets help from men like Willard and Scully.

Multiculturalism is yet another factor which causes identity-crisis. People from different cultural ethos and backgrounds find it difficult to accept one another. But somehow they will adjust with one another in the “Melting Pot” of America – a society which is a mixture of various cultures. Joshua DeLorenzo writes about the “Melting Pot” theory:

According to Melting Pot Theory peoples from various cultures come to America and contribute aspects of their culture to create a new, unique American culture. The result is that contributions from many cultures are indistinguishable from one another and are effectively ‘melted’ together. (DeLorenzo n.pag.)

In this novel Rebekka is found with prostitutes from different cultural backgrounds. During her conversation with them Rebekka explains her state which makes them mock at her: “When under direct questioning, Rebekka admitted she was to be wed and, yes, for the first time, Dorothea laughed and announced the find to everyone in earshot “A Virgin! Judy, do you hear? An unripe cunt among us.” ” (Morrison 81)

Widow Ealing and her daughter Jane used to pray before taking their food which makes Florens remember her own past. In her childhood, Reverend Father, taught her to pray and study, a habit which was dormant during her days in the house of Jacob Vaark. Florens has to change her place often due to the tasks given by her mistress and she finds culture differing from place to place:

At table for a breakfast of clabber and bread the Widow and Daughter Jane put their palms together, bow their heads and murmur. I do likewise whispering the prayer Reverend Father taught me to say morning and night my mother repeating with me. (Morrison 108)

Here Florens is able to assimilate into the new culture and so overcome her identity-crisis.

Immigrants usually overcome their identity-crisis by such process as 'assimilation' and 'hybridization.' "Assimilation" is digesting or absorbing everything which happens in the alien land. In the process of assimilation the migrant adopts the culture of the host country and lives happily. In this novel, Lina and Florens are the best examples of assimilation. Florens is wont to wear shoes and she never bothers about the condition of the shoes. She will adjust with the available things: "Mistress give me Sir's boots that fit a man not a girl. They stuff them with hay and oily corn husks and tell me to hide the letter inside my stocking - no matter the itch of the sealing wax." (Morrison 2) Thus Florens accepts her lot and manage to live it happily.

Hybridization is the next way to overcome identity-crisis. In this state the expatriate will lead a life partly native and partly foreign. This is exactly what Joshua DeLorenzo says and explains as the Salad Bowl Theory:

According to the Salad Bowl Theory there are times when newly arrived immigrants do not lose the unique aspects of their cultures like in the melting pot model, instead they retain them. The unique characteristics of each culture are still identifiable within the larger American society, much like the ingredients in a salad are still identifiable, yet contribute to the overall makeup of the salad bowl. (DeLorenza n.pag.)

Sorrow and Rebekka are the best examples of hybridization. Sorrow being marginalized in an alien land is unable to accept her life filled with woes and chaos. She is forced to accept her state of being a servant of Jacob Vaark and so she is often bent upon finding an escape route. Eventhough Sorrow lives in various places she is unhappy with these new circumstances and is unable to assimilate into the new place. Being the daughter of a Ship captain she spends her life in sea and so she is terrified with the life on land which affects her both physically and mentally. Often she is engaged in nostalgia that is memories. Sorrow being unable to accept her present status, stands apart from Florens, who easily assimilates into the host country.

A Mercy is a psychological novel dealing with the inner psyche of each character. As a novel of "Psychological Realism", it probes and fathoms the depths of the inner man. As a "novel of the inner man" it abounds in interior narratives such as thoughts, motives and feelings. 'Stream of Consciousness', 'interior monologues' and 'flashbacks' a few techniques used in psychological

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novels. As Morrison's *A Mercy* is enriched with these characteristics, it may very well be categorized as a psychological novel.

Birjadish Prasad writes in *A Background to the Study of English Literature* about psychological theories and its features. He says that every human being is a prisoner of his own consciousness:

The most telling effect of the emphasis on consciousness was to shift the location of reality from external, social circumstances to the individual consciousness. The human being is typically a prisoner of his own consciousness and consequently, isolated. (Prasad 209)

Morrison has very well brought out the wounded psyche and its scars. Rebekka rescues Sorrow from the woman who slaps her in the market. But after passing a little distance, Rebekka takes her chance to slap Sorrow. Poor Sorrow, sits motionless with such indelible inner scars which are very deep and poignant.

Florens says that Rebekka also has 'sweeter heart'. When Lina asks Mistress for the shoes of her dead daughter, she agrees. Later, when she sees Florens with that shoes, tears pierce through her eyes without any control and reminds her bruised heart. It also affects the psyche of Florens. Marjorie Downie writes about the rejection of every character in this novel and his yearnings for acceptance:

The world of this novel is an inclusive one, with relationships between women and girls dominant, but it also touches on relationships between men and between men and boys. It seems to be saying that whether male or female, African American, Native American, European American or "mongrelized," the character are all orphans – human beings full of hurt and needful of love and acceptance. (Downie 58)

Hurt by the world, these characters are in need of love and acceptance which leads to pain, agony and isolation.

Sorrow is considered as an 'ill omen' when she was taken by Jacob Vaark to his house. When she is not accepted, she is forced to be isolated and it affects her psyche. The response of the Mistress, Rebekka and Lina regarding the arrival of Sorrow is clearly indicated in the following lines: "By the time Sir brought Sorrow home, the resident women were a united front in dismay. To Mistress she was useless. To Lina she was bad luck in the flesh." (Morrison 51) Willard, the indentured servant of Jacob Vaark is all alone before the arrival of Scully. He looks

after the cattle when he is forsaken. Naturally, such alienated persons become powerless and live a meaningless, aimless, estranged lives.

Again, they brood over the dead yesterday and the unborn tomorrow. At this juncture, they nostalgically chew over and over their past memories. According to “Oxford Learner’s Pocket Dictionary,” the word ‘nostalgia’ stands for “feeling of sadness and pleasure when you think of happy times in the past.” (290). As such, they brood over their past memories – Memories of pain and joy. It is actually such a memory of their past which keeps them from the brink of ruin. It is their memory of the past from which they manage to extract solace of sorts – that keep them afloat:

The experiences and suffering that the characters in *A Mercy* had undergone assert Morrison’s notion that the struggle to forget one’s past is fruitless, and that past has an enormous impact on black person’s life. The characters chose the right way to survive: they experienced the painful process of rememory of their complicated and distorted history. (Azukienc 75)

Thus the cruelty of alienation is offset through the memories of their homeland.

The wounded psyche which eats a person alive stems from rejection, as in the case of Florens. Marjorie Downie writes: “The rejection is a wound which stunts the psyche of the young Florens, leading her to “give dominion of [her] self to another.” An act described by her mother at the end as a “wicked thing.” ” (Downie 56). Estrangement is accompanied by fear and both reduce one to a state of zero identity. Here, being dislocated to various places, all the characters have endured both trauma without and within. Trauma within boils down to ‘phobia.’ Neil T. Anderson and Rich Miller have rightly pointed out ‘phobia’ as follows:

Phobias are irrational fears that compel us to do irresponsible things or inhibit us from doing what we should. Phobias reveal developmental problems and can indicate a lack of faith in God.

Fear is different from anxiety and panic attacks because legitimate fears have an object. (14)

In this novel, Lina is isolated from her tribe when they are consumed by measles and so she is afraid of being alone. It is “monophobia” – ‘fear of being alone.’ Likewise, Willard also is affected by monophobia before the arrival of Scully.

When Lina is taken by the Presbyterians, they clean her just in order to avoid spreading measles. They have the ‘fear of disease’ – “pathophobia.” Sorrow is different from others because

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she is unable to mingle with aliens. She has the 'fear of strangers' – "xenophobia." These fears drive to act irresponsibly and create problems. It also reduces their faith in God.

The slaves 'silently 'suffer the slings of fortune.' The slaves who have been long suppressed and oppressed are faceless and voiceless. Trauma without is temporary, and apparent whereas the trauma within is silent and deep-rooted. The physical and psychological scars of the slaves are beyond the powers one's comprehension. But they are fortunate enough to find mercy from their kind-hearted master and march over their tribulations turning their trials into triumphs.

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