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Slavery and Racism in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*

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The study of African American history has grown phenomenally over the last few decades and the debate over the relationship between slavery and racial prejudice has generated tremendous amounts of scholarship. There's a renewed sense of interest in the academia with a new emphasis on studies and discussions pertaining to complicated relationships slavery as an institution has with racism. It is more so when the potential for recovering additional knowledge seems to be limitless. Even in the fields of cultural and literary studies, there is a huge emphasis upon uncovering aspects of the past that would lead one towards a better understanding of the genesis of certain institutionalized systems. A careful discussion of the history of slavery and racism in the new world in the early 17th Century would lead us towards a sensitive understanding of the kind of 'playful' relationship African Americans have with notions pertaining to location, dislocation and relocation. By taking up Toni Morrison's ninth novel entitled *A Mercy* (2008), this paper firstly proposes to analyze this work as an African American's artistic representation of primeval America in the 1680s before slavery was institutionalized. The next segment of the study intends to highlight a non-racial side of slavery by emphasizing upon Morrison's take on the relationship between slavery and racism in the early heterogeneous society of colonial America. The concluding section tries to justify "how" slavery gradually came to be cemented with degraded racial ideologies and exclusivist social constructs which ultimately, led to the equation of the term 'blackness' almost with 'slaves'.

According to Jeffrey Elton Anderson, one of the significant changes in the second half of the twentieth century was the realization that "identity, whether national, ethnic, racial, or otherwise, is a social construct." (89) Talking about the constructed identities of the white-versus-black society of the Nineteenth - early twentieth-century America, he states "whether slavery or race came first, and, if the latter, when and why it surpassed ethnicity and nationality as the supreme form of otherness" is an issue that requires further investigation (89-90). One could say that scholarly debate over the roots of race is a recent phenomenon even though its background stretches back to early anthropologists and sociologists. Franz Boas in his *The Mind of Primitive Man* (1911) rejects race as a determinant of culture, intelligence, or temperament (5-6). Articulating a concept of "cultural relativism," Margaret Mead, in the year 1928, built on Boas' assertions, articulated the idea that one must judge other cultures by their own criteria and not those of the observer's community (234). Some anthropologists, by the 1940s, even rejected race and racism. Ashley Montagu offered such an argument in *Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race* (1942). According to Anderson, the debate on the origin of slavery was a more recent ancestor of the history of race and emphasizes that "in the past, most scholars had uncritically assumed that both race and slavery had existed from the first contact of white Virginians and unwilling African immigrants. With the latter subjected to reevaluation, it became possible for the former to be questioned as well." (91) As such, the categories of race, ethnicity, and nationality were competing and unstable concepts in colonial America.

Kathleen Brown stressed that “Enslaved Africans in British North America were viewed as culturally malleable compared to Indians but less easily physically transformed... by unions with the English.” (95) Historical record highlights that although the British colonists had certainly adopted a form of slavery based on otherness by the late seventeenth century, slave status had by no means been confined to a particular “race.” One would see a profound shift in racial attitudes as historians approached the middle of a century – the twentieth – wherein, they had begun to question whether the long history of racial discord that had defined so much of American history could have been avoided. Anderson claims, the fact that “an opposition of black and white would come to define the meaning of both race and slavery was uncertain during the colonial period.” (93) Ruth Benedict opines that a type of race prejudice originated during the early period of European expansion into the New World in which, as applied to blacks, this early prejudice became an excuse for colonial slavery. As increasing numbers of African Americans converted to the Christian faith, their owners had to turn to other grounds to justify slavery. Since skin color proved to be the most obvious difference between the races, the colonists adopted it as the factor that would separate the slaves from the free (1945 97-164). In time, nationalist ethnocentrism and class distinction broadened the gap between slaveholders and their chattels. In an influential article, “Origins of the southern labor system,” (1950) Oscar and Mary F. Handlin stated that laws against runaways, inter-class marriage, and the like gradually came to be more strictly applied to black servants/slaves than to white servants. Slavery thereby, became tied to color, locking blacks in colonial North America’s lowest socioeconomic class (211). In the late seventeenth century, as the slave population increased, further legislation widened the gap between the races and African Americans, by 1700 had ceased to be people and had become property.

A careful discussion of the history of slavery and racism in the new world in the early 17th Century would lead us towards a sensitive understanding of the kind of ‘playful’ relationship African Americans have with notions pertaining to location, dislocation and relocation. By particularly taking up Toni Morrison’s ninth novel *A Mercy* (2008), this paper intends to highlight a careful representation of the complicated workings of the “slave society” in the early colonial America. The remote setting which Morrison adopts here to investigate an unpopular aspect of American history would be dealt with to examine “how” this work departs from all her previous novels in uncovering a non-racial side to the history of slavery. Bearing in mind the various critical debates and discussions aforementioned, this paper will look at Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy* to underline the trajectory in which slavery gradually came to be closely associated with racism in the early colonial times in America.

In one of the articles published by the Chicago Tribune, Toni Morrison discusses racism and emphasizes the notion that when she started writing *A Mercy*, she looked at the idea of innocence and says, "If nobody starts out that way (racist)," Morrison alleged:

What about a nation? We seem in this country to combine the idea of slavery and race, but that isn't true. Look at Greece and the Mayans.... I wanted to look at a moment when people came here running from something terrible,Religion was bloody and this was a time when people held onto their beliefs with ferocity because of the culture they came from. (Courtney 2010: “Toni Morrison discusses racism and "A Mercy" during a keynote speech”: Web)

Hugely influenced by the history book *White Cargo: The Forgotten History of Britain's White Slaves in America* (2008) by Don Jordan and Michael Walsh, Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008) skillfully explores the theme of the non-racial history of slavery in the early colonies. Based on Morrison's intense study of early American settlers in the novel, she undeniably "seeks to remove race from slavery." (Li 115) In a television interview, Morrison notes that the only difference between African slaves and European or British slaves was that the latter could run away and melt into the population, but if they were black they were noticeable.

By populating her narrative with a range of characters that, on a variety of grounds are deprived of personal liberty, Morrison claims "separating indentured servants from slaves, legally, and giving indentured servants a kind of power that slaves did not have, was much later the hierarchy of race between black and white had not existed." ("Toni Morrison in conversation with Fran Lebowitz" : Web)

Stephanie Li states that white slaves were most often considered "indentured servants who theoretically could work off their passage to the New World though they were often enslaved for life." (115) Based on her study of American colonial history, Morrison learned that race became a meaningful category of social identity primarily after "Bacon's Rebellion, an uprising that occurred in Virginia in 1676." (Li 115) The Uprising was led by a wealthy planter, Nathaniel Bacon and it marked one of the first instances in which poor blacks and whites were united in a common cause. Li opines that the possibility of such cross-racial coalition frightened the ruling class and led to new laws that "protected white privilege and linked African ancestry to slave status." (115) As one observes in Morrison's *A Mercy*, one of the main characters in the novel, Jacob Vaark, an enterprising Anglo-Dutch trader, reflects upon the stringent laws enacted to discourage alliances across racial and class divides:

By eliminating manumission, gatherings, travel and bearing arms for black people only; by granting licenses 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. Any social ease between gentry and laborers forged before and during that rebellion, crumbled beneath a hammer wielded in the interests of the gentry's profits (10).

The novel is set during a time in American history in which racial categories were only beginning to emerge. The novel presents an eclectic type of extended family that belongs to John Vaark, an Anglo-Dutch settler and the other members include an English girl Rebekka, bartered into marriage, Lina, a Native American survivor whose tribe was wiped out by smallpox, Sorrow, a half-mad orphaned girl of unspecified ethnicity, an African American slave girl named Florens and two un-free white male indentured servants,. The novel is multi-vocal, as we are told the stories of individual characters by means of a third person limited narration, having access to their thought and fears and strategically indicts the account of "What had initially started off really well as a new society with slave in no time transformed itself into a 'slave society' of the New Americas" (Foner 9). It is only Florens who speaks for herself in first person and is representative of the confusing sense of self, a slave felt during that time.

The colonial America that Morrison depicts here is not "a land hungry for freedom, but a land that is jittery and repressive, fixated on profit and punitive by instinct. Fate and economics

bring the characters together, and hold them together only for as long as it takes to recognize a common victim-hood.” (Rokosz-Piecko 82)

Although some historians would argue against being more noticeable as the sole quality constituting the difference in the situation of white and non-white indentured servants, Morrison proves her point by populating her narrative with a variety of characters that are deprived of personal liberty on a variety of grounds. One would clearly notice that Jacob Vaark’s extended family could be a subtle metaphor for representing colonial America – a house – that benefitted the most from slavery. Vaark’s family is built based upon fault lines wherein, each member of it was bartered in a crudely benign manner. On his view on Rebekka, Vaark admits “From the moment he saw his bride-to-be struggling down the gangplank with bedding, two boxes and a heavy satchel, he knew his good fortune. ... he wanted a certain kind of mate: an unchurched woman of childbearing age, obedient but not groveling, literate but not proud, independent but nurturing.” (18)

Lina admits “As long as Sir was alive it was easy to veil the truth: that they were not a family — not even a like-minded group. They were orphans, each and all.” (57) The little community functions until Jacob’s death. This death of the master leaves the women entirely vulnerable and leads the “extended family” to disintegrate. As long as he lives, that entity functions, despite the obvious discrepancies. The wilderness, against which the first settlers led their struggle, turns out to be less hostile and cruel than as Rokosz-Piecko puts it “the approaching civilization with its eighty-two norms and regulations, religious arguments, violent uprisings and eventual exclusion of every non-white.” (82-83) Florens admits the vulnerability of their situation after Vaark dies “Mistress has cured but she is not well. Her heart is infidel. All smiles are gone. Each time she returns from the meetinghouse her eyes are nowhere and have no inside. Like the eyes of the women who examine me behind the closet door, Mistress’ eyes only look out and what she is seeing is not to her liking.” (157)

In an interview conducted by Michele Norris around the time of the novel’s appearance, Morrison most frequently mentions the fact that she tried to refer to slavery as “a universal phenomenon. Many white people are descendants of slaves” (2008: “Toni Morrison Finds A Mercy in Servitude” Web). It suggests an attempt to create a usable past, a potential common ground, by describing a time period before scientific notions of racial difference in which slavery was justified were established. Some critics would call *A Mercy* a softer version of *Beloved*. As Morrison says, she was interested in not what the clerics were doing or the merchants or even the armies but what the people who sort of seemed to her to never appear in the history (Norris, “Toni Morrison Finds A Mercy in Servitude” Web). Morrison infuses her narrative with voices that represent a time in early colonial America inhabited by a free black man like the blacksmith in the novel whom Lina finds arrogant. This is evident when she reflects her fear-stricken thoughts: “Learning from Mistress that he was a free man doubled her anxiety. He had rights, then, and privileges, like Sir. He could marry; own things, travel, sell his own labor. ... he removed his hat once more, then did something Lina had never seen an African do: he looked directly at Mistress... never blinking those eyes slanted and yellow as a man’s.” (43)

Indeed the return to the origins of what would eventually become the eastern seaboard of the North Atlantic U.S. also “unmaps” the rosy myths of the foundations of the country, in which

the “Europes,” far from “civilizing” the untamed continent, bring death, disease, and destruction to the indigenous people who maintained a much more harmonious relationship of man to nature. In spite of the fact that on his journey to Maryland Jacob Vaark acknowledges native ownership of all the land (12), he pointedly notes the king’s dominion, as a “privately owned country,” which nevertheless allowed trade to foreign markets, and which was “good for planters, better for merchants, best for brokers” like himself (11), a fact that allows him to swallow his squeamishness over trading and lending to papists.

Morrison confronts with the issue of the interplay between race and slavery when in the novel, Florens’ mother admits that “When they finally land, she observes how race becomes the primary determinant of her identity: “It was there I learned how I was not a person from my country, nor from my families. I was negrita. Everything language, dress, gods, dance, habits, decoration, song—all of it cooked together in the color of my skin. So it was as a black that I was purchased by Senhor.” (165) As Li states “Florens’s mother is thus irrevocably marked by her blackness. The sign of her bondage becomes an inescapable inheritance for her two children (117). The gradual appearance of racial categories in defining slavery alters, alienates and marginalizes lives of major characters in the novel. Gradually when the notion of racism was adopted to justify the smooth running of the institution of slavery, all that was becoming predominant was the increasing sense of dislocation non-white slaves felt and also a growing sense of feeling more rooted in a sense of disrooted-ness.

As one of the minor characters in the novel Downes says “They ship in more. Like firewood, what burns to ash is refueled. And don’t forget, there are births. The place is a stew of mulattoes, creoles, zambos, lobos, chinos, coyotes.” (28) The slave society we find here slowly started cradling notions guided by racial prejudices and ways of “othering” based on which individuals were fit to be reduced into mere objects based on skin colors – the marker of a person’s entitlement to become a slave. The objectification process could be seen when after the conflagration had wiped away Lina’s village –

... she was taken to live among kindly Presbyterians. They named her Messalina, just in case, but shortened it to Lina to signal a silver of hope. 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 to eat corn mush with one’s fingers was perverse (46).

In another episode, Florens admits that something precious is leaving her and she is a thing apart and emphasizes “With the letter I belong and am lawful. Without it I am weak calf abandon by the herd, a turtle without shell, a minion with no telltale signs but darkness I am born with, outside, yes, but inside as well and the inside dark is small, feathered and toothy. ... The sun’s going leaves darkness behind and the dark is me. Is we. Is my home.” (113) The height of dehumanizing an individual is reflected when she states –

“... they tell to take off my clothes. Without touching they tell me what to do. To show them my teeth, my tongue. They look under my arms, between my legs. They circle me, lean down to inspect my feet. Naked under their examination. I watch for what is in their eyes. No

hate is there or scare or disgust but they are looking at me my body across distances without recognition.” (111)

Things change as the narrative progresses and what initially was a society with slaves turned into a hub in which black slaves and normally white indentured servants were beginning to be separated on racial grounds, putting the indentured servants above the slaves. As Morrison says "The function of racism is dysfunction," and added, "It is a route to power, but that power is not yours. It is not yours" (Crowder 2010: "Toni Morrison discusses racism and "A Mercy" during keynote speech" Web). One notices that even Scully and Willard change ever since Mistress handed the shillings in return for their services in the farm. Willard claims "The shillings she offered was the first money they had ever been paid, raising their work from duty to dedication, from pity to profit." (142) By distancing themselves from those who were non-white, both of them succeeded to please their mistress and consequently, "watched the disaffection Mistress spread", in an attempt to please her and "When she beat Sorrow, had Lina's hammock taken down, advertised the sale of Florens, he cringed inside but said nothing." (153)

One observes that Morrison presents a wide range of characters with all unique backgrounds and social positions in this novel to justify 'how' the concept of "blackness" came to be linked, not only with "bondage" but also with religiously textured notions of evil in order to justify slavery as an institution meant to civilize the non-whites. Against the backdrop of the late seventeenth century colonial America, in which, the country's reliance on slavery as an economic engine was just beginning to develop, the author asserts that slavery was pre-racial, a time before the terrible transformation irreversibly linked slavery to skin-color or race. *A Mercy* is indeed a multi-layered, multi-encrusted text in its meanings and possibilities, in terms of its intense critical import that highlighted upon sites embedded with the genealogy of slavery and racism.

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