

Treatment of Slavery in 'A Mercy'

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Abstract

This paper aims at analyzing how the theme of slavery is treated in the novel *A Mercy* written by Toni Morrison. Published in 2008, it is categorized as a neo-slave narrative by critics. The paper argues that the novel treats slavery and its complexities by casting it into a neo-slave form. The neo-slave structure allows the author freedom to treat the theme in a way that is not usually possible in the rigid traditional slave narrative way. The novel is set in the late seventeenth century Colonial America when racial lines are getting strengthened. Race-based slavery was in its formative years. Different forms of slavery—chattel slavery, indentured servitude etc., were practiced. It finally proposes to examine the post-modernist narrative techniques employed by the novelist to dissect slavery and how it complicates human relations.

The Historical Context

A Mercy is set in the late seventeenth century colonial America when race-based discrimination was taking roots. Bacon's Rebellion united the blacks, natives and poor white indentured servants against the wealthy slave masters. Unfortunately for these people, it was contained and in the wake of the rebellion a series of laws was passed by the Virginia Assembly which legalized racial segregation and discrimination. In 1682, Virginia was in a mess. The whites were relatively safer than anybody else. Runaway blacks, starving people, armed felons were common (Morrison 16).

Bacon's rebellion was one unifying war in which blacks, natives, poor whites, mulattoes, freedmen, slaves and indentured participated. They waged a people's war against local gentry. The outcome of the war was not in favor of the poor who participated in it. In the aftermath of the war, elimination of manumission, gatherings, travel and bearing arms by black people were legally instituted. The whites were sanctioned license to kill any black without proper grounds. The slave owners were 'compensated for a slave's maiming or death'. 'They separated and protected all whites from all others forever.' These laws were passed in the interests of the gentry's profits. Thought Jacob Vaark's feels that these were 'lawless laws' which are meant for encouraging cruelty against the black, he himself participated in it through his investments in plantation crops where slaves are employed (16).

As the novel is set in times of pre-racialized slavery it helps to understand the nature of slavery in America. It is portrayed as a human as well as moral issue not just a racial issue in this novel. It brings out different forms of bondage that were present in America—the chattel slavery, indentured bondage, Native American bondage etc. These different categories help us to understand the institution of slavery in its all complexities. To understand it fully, it is necessary to go beyond it and interrogate the very ideology

behind such inhuman system. Toni Morrison succeeds in doing this by interrogating the very roots of the moral complications and contradictions of the system.

Florens, a young black girl is given up by her mother who suffers life-long slavery at the hands of her master, D'Ortega. She is a black woman transported from her native land in Africa to her present master's plantation in Maryland. She undergoes the horrible experiences of the middle passage. She does not want her daughter to suffer like her and wishes to give her daughter to Jacob Vaark, a white man who is against slavery. Vaark pays a visit to Ortega's plantation to get back his debt given to him. Ortega instead of repaying the debt offers one of his slaves to him as a partial repayment. In the beginning, he does not accept the offer, but finally agrees to take Flores, a young black girl as he thinks her wife would feel happy to have a young girl on her farm land whose babies have met premature death.

Thus, Florens is brought to Vaark's farmland in New England region of America and grows up there. A kind of companionship develops among the women (Rebekka, Vaark's wife and the mistress; Lina, the Native American woman, Sorrow, a mixed-race woman who is a bit insane) on the farm land. They forge family-like relationships though it is 'a companionship carved out of isolation'.

Florens falls in love with the free Blacksmith who comes to do work on the Iron Gate for Vaark's proposed mansion. He leaves the farm land without informing her thus leaving her and puzzled. Meanwhile the master of the farm dies due to small pox before the house is fully constructed. He is taken into the house he has built so that his soul could have peace. All the inmates find it hard to digest the death of their master as they feel that are fatherless now. The small pox spreads to his wife, who asks Florens to bring the Blacksmith as he is the only one who has a cure for her disease.

Florens goes through American wilderness, in search of the Blacksmith. She escapes a group of religious fanatics who take her to be an incarnation of devil due to her black skin. She finally finds the smith who has recently adopted a young boy Malaik. Florens finds the boy an impediment to her love for the blacksmith. When the smith comes back after curing the mistress, he finds the injured boy. He becomes furious with Florens and tries to hit her. The girl finds her love rejected comes back to the farmland. Now, her days are spent without any enthusiasm for life. She spends the night in the mansion alone carving words into the walls and telling her story through the words.

Types of Slavery

The two main types of servitude that are described in the novel are: chattel slavery which is hereditary and lifelong. The first generation African slaves and their descendants; indented servitude which is a contractual system by which Europeans agree to a certain number of years of work in return for payment of their passage to America. The difference lies in that the bond laborers received payment for their passage and labor whereas the slaves did not. Legally, bond laborers are better protected under law, while

the slaves did not have such rights. The slaves did not have the right to education, marriage and sell labor. The slaves and particularly the women were highly vulnerable to exploitation as seen in this novel.

Through the novel, Morrison exposes the fault lines within the system which was based on racial discrimination. The degrading effects of such a system have been brought out through different characters.

Chattel Slavery

Florens and her mother suffer hereditary slavery. Slaves were sold and bought as a piece of property. Florens 'has the hands of a slave and the feet of a Portuguese lady' (10). She had to pick okra and sweep tobacco sheds on D'Ortega's plantation. She was forced to sleep on the cookhouse with her mother.

She was lucky to learn words as she was taught to read and write by the Reverend Father once every seven days hiding near the marsh because they are forbidden to leave the place. The situation on the Vaark's farm was no different. Here, she sleeps in the broken sleigh with Lina, who takes care of her like mother. She finds it better than sleeping on the Ortega's farm. They had to sleep in cowshed in cold winter nights (13).

There are numerous examples of racial slavery in the novel. In Maryland, a ten-year-old boy drives the cart and carries the wealthy white (19). According to Morrison, there was not much difference between tobacco and slaves. They were prone to collapse by sustained violence or sudden disease in Maryland (19). The horrible middle passage is described in full. A third of D'Ortega's ship's 'cargo' had died of ship fever. He throws these dead bodies into the bay. These corpses were scooped up and burned or buried. These bodies were piled in two drays, carted out to low land for finishing the bodies by salt weed and alligator (21). A ship from Lisbon carried enough cargo to replenish the heads he has lost. D'Ortega's ship sinks and he has lost the vessel and all the crew. There is a reference to 'four unsalable Angolans red-eyed with anger'. This is a reference to the anger of the Africans at the treatment being meted out to them. Though, there were instances of African resistance and rebellion from time to time during the passage, these far few and far between and immediately crushed with impunity.

The moral debauchery and hypocrisy of the wealthy white is superbly brought out when D'Ortega's tells that it is no less than God's work that they are doing by "caring" for ill and deviant slaves. This shows how religion is used as an alibi for their involvement in the institution of slavery.

Color discrimination was gradually taking shape. Florens's mother experiences this by her master D'Ortega when she is transported from her native place in Africa to America. She says "It was there I learned how I was not a person from any 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" (144).

The stratified social structure is evidenced in relations between the rich aristocracy and the moderately wealthy traders. The rich prided on their possession of large plantations, huge mansions and numerous slaves. They did not hesitate to parade their pomp and glory in front of others and thus show their greatness. It was on one of such occasions that Vaark gets infatuated with Ortega's wealth at display as exhibited through his slaves, mansion and plantation, that he decides to construct a similar mansion on his farm land. The futility of wealth and impermanence of material is exposed finally when Vaark dies in the mansion he has built without having the fortune of staying in it. The lower strata of society consisted of slaves, bond laborers and others in servitude who led a highly inhuman life.

Acts of atrocities on the servants and slaves are amply provided in the narrative: the quick death in acid common in tanneries; disease and death that was rampant on the ships filled with slaves being transported to America, and dumping of their corpses in the lowland where the salt weed and alligators would consume them; they were dressed in sackings, flogged, molested, abused and sold in the market like inanimate objects. The rape of black girls and women was a common practice.

The vulnerability of slave girls and women is explored through the characters of Florens and her mother. Florens's mother is often seen worrying about protection for her and her daughter on D'Ortega's tobacco plantation in Maryland from the white Europeans. She is worried about daughter who is now growing up and is often the object of her master's voyeurism. She implores her daughter "Understand me. There was no protection and nothing in the catechism to tell them no" (142). She wonders that even the religion i.e., Christianity does not have anything against slavery and sexual exploitation of black girls and women.

Indentured servitude

Willard Bond and Scully are two indentured servants who work on Vaark's farm. Their confessional perspective revealed in one of the chapters regarding their servitude reveals the darker side of human bondage. Both these men are white Europeans and work for purchasing their freedom. The bonded laborers Will and Scully are also not allowed to inside the house of their master. It shows that their situation is also similar to a shade better than the slaves. Vaark buys them from his neighbor for exchange of land. Lina, the native woman understands the clever ways of her master. He has a clever way of getting without giving (14).

Willard's original term of seven years of service was with a planter in Virginia. It was extended as a punishment for his insolent and deviant behavior. A bond worker was expected obey his master's orders. He was later bought by a wheat planter in the North. He reveals that he had earlier served as many as twenty-three masters of different ethnic background, "Six English, one native, twelve from Africa by way of Barbados" (147). His term was increased by false charges against by his masters. He led a miserable life in the north in extreme cold weather and surroundings. His fear comes forth the way he describes "The dread of those solitary nights gripped his days, Swine, sheep and cattle were his sole companions..." (147).

It shows how bonded people faced innumerable challenges working in the colonies both in the South and the North. The colonies differed in their climate and the treatment of slaves. The South had more difficult working conditions and the harsher working conditions and the crueler slave owners of the South were in stark contrast to the isolation and difficult weather in the North.

Scully's mother was working with a tavern-keeper. Scully was hired after her mother's death to continue and finish her mother's bond. He was made a bond laborer to finish his dead mother's contract"(54). He was obliged to pay off his mother's debt by working for the remaining years without any payments. The narrator noted that "In his twenty-two years, Scully had witnessed far more human folly than Willard. By the time he was twelve he had been schooled, loved and betrayed by an Anglican curate" (151). He was flogged even when the real culprit was the curate.

He does not know exactly when his contract labor would end and hopes that "his enslavement would end before death". (54) He wants to earn his living by selling his labor once he is free. Lina expects that if he is freed soon he would run away.

Scully's sexual abuse by a minister highlights again the hypocrisy of religion as it was prevalent in the then America. Sorrow a woman on Vaark's farm land was also cheated one of the church members. Like Sorrow's deacon, Scully's minister shows the contradictions of religious sects in America. Morrison thus exposes the two sides of religion. On the one side, it professes morality and on the other, the clergy involve in immoral and forbidden relationships.

Narrative Techniques

The author uses multiple perspectives for narrating the story instead of a mono-perspective as found in a traditional neo-slave narrative. There are twelve chapters in the novel. Each chapter is told from the perspective of one of main characters. As many as six alternate chapters is devoted to the perspective of Florens, the central character. Each of the remaining six chapters is narrated by the other important characters namely Rebekka, Sorrow, Lina, Florens' mother etc. The use of this technique gives the novel its uniqueness. The characters are free to come up with what they feel and experience about the other characters. The freedom empowers them to voice their hearts and readers are provided the different shades of individual characters.

Another technique used by the author is non-linear narration. The traditional neo-slave novel narrates the story in a linear way. The beginning of the story is always at the beginning. This novel uses temporal as well as spatial shifts and the reader is moved from one time and space to another suddenly. This device helps the narrator to catch all the facets of racial slavery in the late seventeenth century in America.

Conclusion

The novel thus explores the various forms of slavery prevalent during the seventeenth century Colonial America. The chattel slavery was a inhuman system of bondage by which the Africans were forcefully brought to America and employed there as plantation laborers. The institutionalization of slavery as a system was the outcome of a bunch of

laws passed in Virginia in the wake of the Bacon's rebellion in which both the slaves and the bond laborers came together and opposed their inhuman treatment at the hands of the white Europeans. The position of the bond laborers was only a bit better than the black slaves. Both had to live a life of drudgery and suffering. They were denied rights and their freedom was curtailed. It becomes very clear that indentured servants and the slaves were treated as a commodity. The gentry treated them inhumanly and exploited them. The use of multiple perspectives, non-linear narrative techniques and fragmented language are some of the techniques used by the author to portray the cruel realities of racial slavery of the times.

Works Cited

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