



ISSN 2455-7544
www.daathvoyagejournal.com

Daath Voyage : An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English

An UGC Refereed Open Access Journal

Vol. 2 No.3, September, 2017

Editor : Saikat Banerjee

<http://daathvoyagejournal.com>

Editor: Saikat Banerjee

Department of English

Dr. K.N. Modi University, Newai, Rajasthan, India.



Characterization of Human Longing and Wishes: the Unconscious Desire for Social Privilege of Women in *A Mercy*

Bilal Ahmad Kuthoo
Research Scholar
Jiwaji University Gwalior, M. P

Abstract: Toni Morrison's novel *A Mercy* portrays inequality of gender and social position, economic depravity and material imbalance, emotional complications and dependence, this paper aims at uncovering these issues pertaining to the women's desire for a social privilege. It is fate, and foremost the material that brings the different characters together and binds them together in the hope of a better social position. But Morrison throughout the novel emphasizes the fact that women are at the mercy of men, the women are not economically dependent but their emotional dependence has crippled them hence a perpetual vulnerability has been bestowed to them in societies throughout the history. Women characters in this novel have demonstrated a desire for a better life and social stability. This paper attempts to demonstrate how the desire for a suitable life and social acceptance has been the central force in the novel *A Mercy*.

Key Words: inequality, gender, mercy, vulnerability, social acceptance.

Man and nature has always been in confrontation to each other and man has always strived to conquer the nature and "bring nature under his control" (Morrison 49). But the power of man constantly fell short to have any control over the nature. It is nature that has always won the battle between man and nature. Man has always surrendered before the infinite power of the nature which is always indomitable. Different stages approach in the life of a human, he or she has to face many turns in his or her life; several times due to nature. The natural calamity sometimes changes one's life entirely, happiness is turned into sorrow, a garden is turned into a barn land, and a family is left with a single family member. This is the case with Vaark family in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008).

What Morrison ventured to demonstrate in *A Mercy* she says in her own words:



Certain kinds of trauma visited on people are so deep, so cruel, that unlike money, unlike vengeance, even unlike justice, or rights, or the good will of others, only writers can translate such trauma and turn sorrow into meaning, sharpening the moral imagination. (qtd. in Flood 2009)

It is evident that Toni Morrison believes that writers best understand every tragic and traumatic experience of people and can vividly place it before audience. In *A Mercy*, she has chosen a “less popular aspect” of American history and she has given it a shape of family to position it before the readers. *A Mercy*, it is not a novel that foregrounds the plight of only the Black people but Black slaves are only a part of her narrative.

Toni Morrison’s novel *A Mercy* at cursory level wholly seems to be a novel about slavery but there is much more in the novel, it is set in 1690’s. Black slaves are not the only characters of the novel, besides Black slaves like Florens, there are indentured labors like Willy and Scully, and also natives like Lina. “Each character adds a piece to a communal quilt, and the novel’s narrative structure privileges no one voice over another” (Babb 149). The novel is an amalgamation of bad situation faced by everyone Black slaves, Natives and Whites like Jacob Vaark and his family. On the one hand, the novel throws light on the plight of Black slaves, and on the other hand Toni Morrison demonstrates that the White master Jacob Vaark is not a prosperous family head. His wife bares four children but none of them survive. Only his daughter reaches the age of five, she is hit by a horse, and she dies of a broken crown.

The novel opens with a description of Jacob Vaark’s journey to his debtor D’Ortega. Jacob Vaark is offered slaves instead of money that D’Ortega owes him. At the first place, Mr. Vaark seems less interested in the slaves and refuses to take any slave to close the debt. His intentions are more humane than money-making. His reply to D’Ortega is that “flesh was not his commodity” but goods (Morrison 120). After some argument, Jacob Vaark agrees to take Florens from D’Ortega. Likewise, Lina had already landed and Sorrow later lands at Jacob Vaark’s farmhouse.



Toni Morrison gathers all the important characters and “eager to explore the thoughts of almost every person on Jacob’s farm” (Romano 2008). From there we are given the details of the life of every character and “access to their thought and fears” (Rokosz-Piejko 82). Family emerges as a lack in the life of every character. These characters seem to be alienated and isolated in the society and life pretends to be peaceful at Vaark’s farmhouse, even Willy and Scully feels some contention there. The relation between these slaves and their master is not the relation of suppression and repression as it is expected. Rather, there is a harmony in their relation up to a point when Jacob Vaark’s farmhouse is hit by smallpox. Jacob Vaark dies and leaves behind only a community of women. This situation resemble to Bill Cosey’s death in *Love* (2003), when he also leaves behind only women.

The characters we meet in the novel like Florens, Lina, Sorrow etc. suffer from a desire for family. Jacob Vaark Succeeds in marrying and having a family, but the Nature perhaps was not happy with his prosperity and all his children die, and eventually himself die of smallpox. The longing for family, the desire to belong to someone is at foreground in the novel. Lina wants to belong to Florens, Florens wants to belong to blacksmith, blacksmith to the foundling boy Malaik, and Sorrow wants to belong to her baby girl. This “desire to belong” is the distorted form of “the desire for family”.

Lina was the first one who reached Jacob’s farmhouse, her village was hit by smallpox and all the village people died. Wolves devoured the corpus of the dead until the soldiers come. They killed the wolves and set the village ablaze. Lina with two other boys stayed up on a tree, contemplating to stay there or get down and get shot by soldiers. The boys jump down and they are caught in arms by the soldiers. These soldiers are not scared of being infected. Lina does not know where the two other boys were taken, “but she was taken to live among kindly Presbyterians” (Morrison 45). The fall of the Black Death on the Lina’s tribe is connected directly with the immorality of the people. Morrison says that these natives “owned nothing, certainly not the land they slept on” (45). Yet they indulged in hunting and fishing like the degenerated gentry. Lina, at Presbyterians, “acknowledges her status as heathen” (45), “afraid of once more losing the shelter” and “terrified of being alone in the



world without family” (45). So, Lina conforms to every social custom and ritual of Presbyterians. She was not in position to lose at least shelter. Presbyterians could not have been family for her yet she belonged to it.

To make Presbyterians her own family, Lina started to adopt everything that belonged to them. She abandoned her own identity, “burned the deer skin dress, they clipped the beads from her arms and scissored inches from her hair” (Morrison 46). But at the core she remains alien in Presbyterians. Lina imitated them in the way of dressing but she was not permitted to join “the Sunday Services”. She failed to secure a place in them later she was abandoned.

Even at Vaark’s farmhouse Lina was not feeling at home although she was at good terms with her master. The relation was more harmonious than the strained. Lina managed every work of the farmhouse even she taught Sir to do different works of farming still she recurrently felt “I am exile here” (57). The sense of family life was a desire, Lina knew the reality of her life that after all she is bought by Sir. Farmhouse could not be a home for her since it was home for Rebekka. It was she after all who was not bought but married. Lina’s sense of exile is a perpetual sense of being away from home and family.

Lina’s sense of being alone was one reason that she took Florens under her care immediately after she arrived at farmhouse. Florens could not be a family for Lina but she had “devotion” for Florens. The narrator comments that “her (Lina’s) own barrenness sharpened her devotion” towards Florens (58). Lina being childless developed a desire for Florens and it is not evident in the novel that she was interested in any male. Still, the enthusiasm she has for Florens, it seems she wanted someone her own, especially from her own womb. Undoubtedly, Lina was the loneliest one at farm. She “had hovered over Patrician, competing with Mistress for the little girl’s affection” (59). Lina had yearning for children and consequently for family, it was first depicted from her attitude towards Patrician. Lina endeavoured to share the affection of a child from someone else’s womb but here the chances to have the share in affection were less. When Florens arrived Lina thought that she “could be, would be, her own” (57). Lina wanted to avoid her loneliness and isolation by the presence of Florens who embodied a chance to belong to someone.



Lina's trauma comes to surface with the sight of the shoes that she had once made for Florens. Now, Florens nowhere near, went to fetch Blacksmith, shoes prove to be nostalgic for Lina. Her attachment to Florens is not simply of a companion at farmhouse but the hunger that Lina has, "to be one or have one" (Morrison 61), a desire to build up a family of her own to which she can belong. Lina has no one to whom she could have really made an emotional attachment and the only option before her was Florens.

Lina is more worried about Florens when she has gone to fetch blacksmith. "And without her pet, Lina, the silent workhorse, seemed to have lost interest in everything, including feeding herself" (130). When blacksmith arrives, Lina asks him whereabouts of Florens. When initially Florens was attracted to blacksmith, Lina "was determined to be the wall between Florens and blacksmith" (58), but she did not succeed and "Lina, however, became really ugly in her efforts to keep Florens away" from blacksmith (125). The main reason that Lina was against any relation between Florens and blacksmith was that she herself wanted to be near to her. She claimed to have rights on Florens that she wanted to maintain. Lina was scared of the condition that she would be left alone. Instead of being a sort of in-charge of the farmhouse, Lina was alienated and isolated, and Florens was her only hope.

Florens' Longing for Belonging

Florens' journey of loneliness starts from the house of D'Ortega when she is sold to Jacob Vaark at the age of eight. This was the time when Florens was separated from Minha mea, her mother. She is brought to Vaark's farmhouse, she starts helping in the farm work there. Mr. Vaark bought her with the intention that she will replace the dead daughter, Patrician. Florens initially came much closer to Lina, they slept together, Florens listened to the stories that Lina told her. Florens' attachment to Lina was a sort of "mother hunger" (61). Florens was given preference on her baby brother when her mother held the feet of Jacob Vaark to take her daughter that proved to be an act of mercy in the novel.



Florens was hurt by her mother's endeavour to send her away who wanted to stay near her mother and baby brother. Her life at the farm was of a slave bought to close the debt; even Jacob had no interest in taking a child instead of money to close the debt. Later at farm, Florens is attracted to blacksmith; it was a chance to make her own family. Florens wanted to belong to blacksmith not only because she loved him but blacksmith was the only source to whom she could belong.

The desire that Florens has for blacksmith is really intense, while she is traveling towards him, she has forgotten the real purpose of her journey. She has only one thing in her mind that she will be united with blacksmith, the hope of family for her and the relief of her trauma. She travels alone without any care for any threat not because she had to save the life of her Mistress but just save her own life by being reunited to blacksmith and taste the "sugar" of his shoulders. Morrison has not tried to exaggerate the situation by intensifying the desire for blacksmith in Florens' heart but Morrison has given it a human touch.

Florens came under the trauma of losing blacksmith when he finished the work at Vaark's farmhouse and went to his own place. Florens from that day planned to go there, her desire is not a desire of a slave for freedom but the desire of a common individual who does not belong to any one, who does not belong to any family. Yet she desperately yearns for family life, Florens thinks that her desire could be fulfilled only by blacksmith. Even Florens was given much affection by Lina but she was herself a lonely woman who could not provide Florens family security, Florens' thoughts always flew towards blacksmith.

Florens' journey to blacksmith was possible only when Jacob Vaark died and Rebekka was also infected by smallpox. Florens is sent to fetch the blacksmith. She got a chance to reach blacksmith. She thought that her dream of making family would be fulfilled this time, she makes her mind not to come back. She bares all the hard ships of the journey to reach there. She knew that her errand will save the life of Rebekka but she was not ready to sacrifice her own life by coming back and remain always at farmhouse away from blacksmith, and keep her dreams of family unfulfilled. Blacksmith becomes ultimate goal of her life to have him, to belong to him.



But it seems that Florens is subject to abandonment. She was abandoned by her mother at the age of eight and now she is abandoned by blacksmith. Florens is not accepted by blacksmith and is instructed to go back with the excuse that Florens belongs to Mistress Vaark as a slave. So the condition of Florens becomes worse, all her hopes prove to be illusions. Family life has become indifferent and impossible for her. She could not control her anger when blacksmith tells her that she has to go away. She is called “wild”. She picks up a hammer and attempts to attack blacksmith, a “form of resistance to oppressive power” (Putnam 2011). This type of behavior is seen for the first time from Florens. Certainly, it was all result of broken hopes and promises.

Florens from her childhood was fond of wearing shoes. She was given Sir’s shoes for the journey to blacksmith. But now when she walks back, she is bare feet. The hardships of her life have transformed her soft soles in something hardest. It symbolizes that the coming life for Florens would be tougher but she has consolidated her courage like the soles of her feet. Florens is completely transformed by her “hard-won endeavour and experience” (Sandy 37) after she was sent back by blacksmith. It was the death of her dreams related to a family life with blacksmith. All that she had planned vanished, blacksmith preferred a foundling boy Malaik on Florens; the affection that was due to Florens, a little boy claimed it.

Sorrow Homed and Homeless

Sorrow, Morrison’s great portrayal (in the novel) of real sorrow, was the only one to be saved in looted ship. She herself claimed that she was “dragged ashore by whales” (Morrison 48). She was living on an abandoned ship and two young sawyers discovered her. “They thought she was a boy” (49). The sawyer’s wife named her “Sorrow” because she was a silent “strange melancholy girl” (49). She did not tell anything pertaining to her name or the family she belonged to. She only said “ship”, she belonged to ship and has lived whole her life at ship, she further added. When the sawyer’s two sons paid too much attention to Sorrow,



sawyer's wife got worried and wanted to get rid of the girl. So, Sorrow landed at the farmhouse of Jacob Vaark.

Sorrow for a little time stayed with sawyers. In this time she remained as a pet to sawyers two young sons, still she was safe there to some extent. She failed to recall anything about her previous life, she had no memories of her past life which "seemed as stolen as its (ship's) cargo" (Morrison 115). When sawyer's wife interviewed Sorrow she refused to unfold any information about herself or related to her family. A reader wonders what the case with Sorrow is, is it deliberate that she hides her identity and she does not want to disclose her family? Is her family life so miserable that she does not want to go back? But Sorrows attitude is that she is disillusioned from everything.

At Vaark's farmhouse Sorrow is informed by Lina that she is pregnant, hearing that she is both surprised and happy. "She flashed with the pleasure at the thought of a real person, a person of her own growing inside her" (121). Morrison demonstrates that with the instinct of a baby growing inside Sorrow develops a social sense, she had a hope that there is going to be someone "her own". Sorrow had lived all her life among strangers, as she never remembered any of her family members, family was like a word written on the sand which could be disfigured by a slightest touch of the tide. Now, everything was about to be changed, someone from her own womb will be in this world that will give her a social validity, and the sense of disintegrated self will be vanished away. But all her hopes were destroyed when her baby could not survive and Sorrow was trapped in a traumatic situation due to her loneliness and unfulfilled dream of having someone her own.

But the dream of family seemed to become a reality for Sorrow as she was pregnant for the second time. Toni Morrison does not mention any thing about the father of the babies; neither seems Sorrow interested in any man. Even Morrison has not said how she became pregnant. Sorrow seems to be interested in having a baby so that she can belong to someone. Her own parents remain unknown throughout the novel. So she does not enjoy any relational-connection. Longing for family remains only limited to desire and does not take a materiel



shape, Sorrow's relation with an abandoned ship and then Sawyer's family and later at Vaark farmhouse, every time she was herself subject to abandonment.

With the safe birth of her baby with the help of Scully and Willy, Sorrow changes her name to Complete. How did she become complete with the birth of a child? Morrison does not mention anything though Sorrow knew that this child will become a social tie between her and the society. She hoped that this baby will bridge the gap between her and the outer world which was alien to her up to then. Sorrow by birth was not a slave but she has become one. From the narrative it does not seem that Sorrow is interested in any man, like Florens was in blacksmith. Rather she seems to be much obsessed with having someone produced by her own womb.

The difference between desire for family among Sorrow and Florens is that the former sees it as a production from her own existence and the later sees it as being dependent on someone else's existence. Sorrow has a great devotion for her baby and Florens has a great love for blacksmith. In both the cases isolation and loneliness has taken the shape of desire. A human could not live without social relational ties and same is the case with these two. Vaark's farm provided them with a friendly environment but not the comforting touch of home and family.

Rebekka and Animosity of Nature

When Rebekka, the mistress of the Vaark farm, first arrived Lina was already present there and "hostility between them was instant" (Morrison 50). What was the reason that these two young women grow hostile to each other? Their presence to each other presented a constant threat, real or supposed, of being thrown away. The farm was the only place they belonged to, and Jacob was the only man to protect them. These two together were to form the family for both Lina and Rebekka. The threat of elimination from the farmhouse that they presented to each other proves useless. They knew the world outside the farmhouse will not provide the sense of protection and the mutual fear brought the peace.



The case of Mr. Vaark and Rebekka is fateful, Morrison seems to suggest, Rebekka gave birth to four healthy babies but none of them survived. Only Patrician reached the age of five but died of a broken crown when she was hit by a horse, author knew that for an ambience of compassion, Vaark house has to remain childless even after having four kids. Toni Morrison makes Jacob Vaark a victim of nature who could not save any of his kids and later himself succumbs to smallpox, besides his wife also get infected. As a result, one time happy family of Jacob Vaark is transformed into a curse ridden state, drained by natural calamity.

Toni Morrison seems deliberately endeavour to isolate individuals. Morrison makes her characters to belong to no one; even if they belong to someone there is always an immediate threat of being isolated. Rebekka had a happy home at one stage, her husband took pride in her cooking and she extracted happiness in feeding him. But now no one around, her husband and children dead, Rebekka recalls her father's home and the way she reached this side of Atlantic. She realizes that she was always a vulnerable subject, among father and brothers, among ship mates and also at Jacob Vaark's farmhouse. This isolation is not new for Rebekka, her father and brothers always considered her a burden. She never seemed to be a part of that family where father and brothers always suppressed her. They were eager to get rid of her, Rebekka's relation with her father and brothers was a patriarchic domination. An obvious reason that she was given to a man who booked a seat for her in the ship and was ready to bare the expenses of her journey; it was a kind of "sale" (Morrison 72).

Rebekka remembers when she was boarded on ship, a new world unfolded itself before her. Her journey mates are cutpurse and prostitutes who are given the punishment of exile. These women have no prospect of better life. Rebekka had expected nothing better than this for herself also because she knew the care she was given by her parents can only make her a servant or a prostitute. But she herself preferred to become a wife, some affection was guaranteed there. At first, everything went correct for Rebekka but nature had something else in store, her four children died due to one sickness or the other followed by her husband Jacob Vaark, and Rebekka was left alone. As she was herself sick, she kept thinking about her dead children. Probably, she was contemplating on the blasphemy on their part through



the big house that Jacob Vaark built became a reason for the curse. The few people, her servants, who were around Rebekka when she herself was almost dying, could not take the place of family remembers.

Toni Morrison's strong concern for women and conviction of male dominated society has been demonstrated through the incidents in the novels that Rebekka's children followed one another and died. She develops a doubt in the mercy of God, a mercy from which women has always been deprived. Rebekka heartbrokenly tells Lina "I don't think God knows who we are" (Morrison 78), her expectations from God were enormous, she expected happiness as she had married a good man and had given birth to four children. "Their community further disintegrates when Rebekka retreats into religion, losing the benevolence she once possessed. Her newfound religiosity is enslaving but no more so than Florens' desire to be owned by smithy or Sorrow's belief that her newborn daughter completes her" (Jennings 647).

Toni Morrison has adopted different perspectives. Since women are being suppressed in family or the society, Morrison presents divers reasons for it. In the case of Florens it is individual man, here in the shape of blacksmith, who suppress Florens and in the case of Rebekka's journey mates who are forced to choose either imprisonment or the exile, it is law that suppress the women. In both the cases they are deprived of family care and are set on the perpetual journey of desire for a peaceful family life. "Female characters within Toni Morrison's novels are scarred—physically and/or emotionally—by the oppressive environments around them. Racially exploited, sexually violated, and often emotionally humiliated for years or decades, these women often learn to coexist with their visible and invisible scars by making choices that are not easily understood" (Putnam 2011).

Conclusion

The most significant characters in *A Mercy* are women; Toni Morrison has concentrated only on plight of the women characters. Morrison has also positioned women at the center of the novel may it be Lina, Sorrow, Florens or Rebekka or the women that Rebekka met on the ship. They live a life excluded from society and they do not have any



significance in their society. So, Morrison has drawn a portrait in which women are the most wretched being in the society. Toni Morrison's view seems that all the calamities and disasters that hit a society women are the worst affected.

The family embodies a main vacuum in the life of every character in *A Mercy*. Florens thinks that she was abandoned by her mother and rejected by the blacksmith. Lina was thrown out by Presbyterians and Sorrow was sent away by sawyers. The result in all these cases was loneliness and isolation. Every character wanted to make her life stable through one means or the other. Only Rebekka succeed in having a husband and children but she became the victim of natural calamity. Like all other characters, she was also left alone in the later part of her life when no one among her kin was near her.

Toni Morrison in this novel has also demonstrated the need of the stable family life for an individual. The physical and spiritual wellbeing of an individual depends to a great extent on family peace and social life in modern days is disturbed only because family life is disturbed. Morrison exhibits that the life of these characters is very hard not due to race, colour and ethnicity but some other forces are at work. A human, individually on his own, could not solve the problems, manmade or natural, that he or she faces. One individual, either male or female, need the support of others to survive in life's up and down situations. Florens foremost wants her mother, Lina does not have anyone but wants to possess Florens, Sorrow lost all human connections as she lost connection with looted ship. Sorrow's last hope is her baby. Rebekka had four children and husband but lost everyone. So, having no family puts one in hard times and causes his or her tragedy.

The way Toni Morrison has designed the narrative of *A Mercy*, she places family at the center of every individuals life irrespective of race, colour or ethnicity. Individuals are happy as long as they are in the knot of relations. Jacob Vaark's farmhouse seems very serene and peaceful as long as he is present there and others are also around even blacksmiths temporary presence makes a difference. Everything functions smoothly but once Jacob died the masterless women could not control their mental isolation. They seem to fell in seclusion, no one to facilitate their connection with the rest of the world. Naihao Lee has rightly argued



that “A *Mercy* is a story about order and disorder, organization and disorganization” of “religion, family and individual identities” and one is convinced with this observation.

Works Cited

- Babb, Valerie. “‘E Pluribus Unum?’ The American Origins Narrative in Toni Morrison's ‘A Mercy.’” *MELUS*, Vol. 36, No. 2, 2011, pp. 147–164. JSTOR. Accessed on 15 July 2017. www.jstor.org/stable/23035285.
- Flood, A. “Toni Morrison defends ‘sacredness’ of books against censorship”. *The Guardian*: 05 June 2009. Accessed on 15 June 2017. www.Guardian.co.uk./books/2009/jun/05/tini-morrison-sacredness-censorship.
- Jennings, La Vinia Delois. “Toni Morrison Plots the Formation of Racial Slavery in Seventeenth-Century America” *Callaloo*: Vol. 32, No. 2, Spring 2009. Jstor. Accessed on 15 July 2017. www.jstor.org/stable/27743026.
- Lee, Naihao. “From Psychoanalysis to Schizoanalysis: Synthese and virtual Machines in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and *A Mercy*”. *International journal of art and science*, 2010, 3(16). pp 217-230.
- Morrison, Toni. *A Mercy* Vintage Books, 2008. reprint Aug.2009.
- Putnam, Amanda. “Mothering violence: Ferocious Female Resistance in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Beloved* and *A mercy*” *Black Women, Gender & Families: Volume 5* Number 2, Fall 2011.
- Romano, C. “*Morrison doesn’t Rest on Her Novel Laurels*”(Book review) Powell’s Books. 2008. Accessed on 15 July 2017. www.powells.com/review/2008_11_12.html.
- Rokosz-Piejko, Elzbieta. “Toni Morrison’s (Hi)story Telling—The use of History in *Paradise*, *Love* and *A Mercy*”. *Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Rzeszowskiego*, 2009.
- Sandy, Mark. “Cut by Rainbow: Tales, Tellers and Reimaging Wordsworth’s Pastoral Poetics in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and *A Mercy*.” *MELUS*: Volume 36, Number 2, Summer 2011. Jstor. Accessed on 15 July 2017. www.jstor.org/stable/23035279?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents.