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Suppression of Afro-American Female Characters in Morrison's *A Mercy*

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Abstract

The novel, *A Mercy* is studied from the perspective of gender and the way it has its place in determining roles in the society, the women are assigned a specific place in the novel. They are expected to fulfill their roles as slaves and as mothers. Patriarchy always places a dominant role in deciding what roles Florens, Minha Mae, Sorrow, Lina and Rebekka should ascribe to. All the women in *A Mercy* are the products of the roles prescribed to them by the Patriarchy. Also, all these women characters do not have the choice to work outside the rules and regulations of sexist policies coined and envisaged by patriarchs such as D'Ortega and Jacob Vaark. The African women were characterized by negative stereotypical roles that ranged from being slaves, prostitutes, welfare mothers to aunts. There were some qualities and characteristics that were specific to the black women which were used for justifying their suppression. All rounded up, the political background, the ideology of the society and the economy contributed to a system which gave the Afro-American women a secondary role in the society.

Keywords: gender, stereotypical, patriarchy, slaves, suppression

All the women in *A Mercy* are the products of the roles prescribed to them by the Patriarchy. Also, all these women characters do not have the choice to work outside the rules and regulations of sexist policies coined and envisaged by patriarchs such as D'Ortega and Jacob Vaark. The existence of women around them is simply based on the former's willingness to work for them as wives, concubines or plantation labour. Gender is determined by sex, the society molds their frame of mind so that the womankind should believe that they have a fixed role to play. Their biological difference is forced on them to believe that they are different to men biologically and henceforth they have a different set of roles to play.

The suppression of black women over a very long period of time was voiced by their main concerns related to gender, class, race, nation, age, ethnicity and sexuality being the dominant ones. All these concerns created contexts for the writing of texts by black feminists. The African women were characterized by negative stereotypical roles that ranged from being slaves, prostitutes, welfare mothers to aunts. There were some qualities and characteristics that were specific to the black women which were used for justifying their suppression. All rounded up, the political background, the ideology of the society and the economy contributed to a system which gave the Afro-American women a secondary role in the society. There was a bigger nexus of oppression which worked towards suppressing the intellectual ideas of the black women so that they could not contribute to the larger context of feminist writings. They were denied the positions of writers, poets, professors and scholars. Women were also denied leadership roles in public life. Their exclusion from powerful positions in the society left them reduced to a deprived lot.

Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* progresses in a non-chronological way. Thus, there is little clarity as to where the novel starts. The suggested beginning shows how Jacob Vaark, from New England travels to Maryland to settle a debt with D'Ortega. The latter is a slave trader and a plantation owner at the same time. Having a paucity of money, D'Ortega offers Jacob that he could take any slave from his farm by waving off the outstanding debt. Jacob, however, is not fond of taking a slave, but having no other option, he proposes to take Florens' mother as his slave. Florens' mother had already suffered at the hands of D'Ortega, her slave owner, throughout her life and wanted no similar sufferings for her daughter Florens, hence, she offers Jacob to take Florens as his slave instead. This would save Florens from a life of rape and misery. Jacob

finally finds it agreeable to take Florens as his slave and D'Ortega makes arrangements to bid adieu to Florens who accompanies Jacob to New England. Morrison describes the scene vividly when Florens is offered by her mother to be taken away:

Just then the little girl stepped from behind the mother. On her feet was a pair of way-too-big woman's shoes. Perhaps it was that feeling of license, a newly recovered recklessness along with the sight of those little legs rising like two bramble sticks from the bashed and broken shoes, that made him laugh. A loud chest-heaving laugh at the comedy, the hopeless irritation, of the visit. His laughter had not subsided when the woman cradling the small boy on her hip came forward. Her voice was barely above a whisper but there was no mistaking its urgency... "Please Senhor. Not me. Take her. Take my daughter." Jabob looked up at her, away from the child's feet, his mouth still open with laughter, and was struck by the terror in her eyes. (Morrison 26)

Even after leaving for New England, Florens remains confused about her mother's intentions to send her away. She always remains under the impression that she was undesired because she was a female child, while her brother was more desirable to her mother. Jacob has great admiration for D'Ortega's bungalow and wishes that one day he would build a similar mansion.

During 17th century America, it was common for women to face violence at the hands of men. They were sexually assaulted and subjected to brutal beating. It was this society which institutionalized domestic violence and brutal treatment of women. Violence against women was not chided or punishable by law, as it was hinted by Rebekka that wife-beating was a commonplace experience. A burning example of which was Lina who suffered violence and rape at the hands of her own lover.

Florens as well as her mother were victims of rape. As a reflection of the same society, Sorrow also became pregnant as an adolescent. As women were no more than property for the white males, they had no greater capacity than being simply wives or slaves. Other women, who were not directly associated with men, like widows or single parent were not considered to be a part of mainstream society.

Once taken to Jacob Vaark's farm, Florens met Lina and Sorrow, the other servants who worked at the farm. Rebekka was Jacob's wife though she belonged to Europe and got married to Jacob, through an advertisement. Jacob married Rebekka for the obvious reasons as mentioned by Morrison in *A Mercy*:

Rebekka was ideal. There was not a shrewish bone in her body. She never raised her voice in anger. Saw to his needs, made the tenderest dumplings, took to chores in a land completely strange to her with enthusiasm and intervention, cheerful as a bluebird. Or used to be. Three dead infants in a row, followed by the accidental death of Patrician, their five year old, had unleavened her. A kind of invisible ash had settled over her which vigils at the small graves in the meadow did nothing to wipe away. Yet she neither complained nor shirked her duties. (Morrison 21)

This was the ideal picture of a wife that Rebekka conformed to, which every American man wanted. Rebekka, however, had no children now, as she had lost her daughter in an accident and all her boys died as infants which made her a little depressed in spirit. Florens comes to know soon that Sorrow was mentally not very stable. After giving birth to a stillborn child her mental condition deteriorated. Lina, a native woman takes Florens as her daughter and takes good care of her.

In the meantime, Jacob who once had been very influenced by D'Ortega's mansion collected all the money to build a big house, starts hiring indentured labour from the adjoining states. In this whole process of hiring labour for building the mansion, Willard and Scully are hired, who almost become a part of the family. A blacksmith is also required for building the iron fence around the house.

Florens falls in love with the blacksmith, right after meeting him. Morrison speaks about her adoration of the Blacksmith in *A Mercy* in the following lines:

As Mistress led the cow to pasture the blacksmith locked eyes with Lina before returning his hat to his head. He never once looked at Florens standing nearby, not breathing, holding the milking stool with both hands as though to help gravity keep her earthbound. She should have known then what the consequences would be, but felt sure that Sorrow, always an easy harvest, would quickly draw his attention and thwart Florens' drooling. 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 labour...he was very tall never blinking those eyes slanted and yellow as a ram's. (Morrison 45)

He is of an African origin. Florens and blacksmith fall in love with each other. The other women around them had suffered misery in their own relationships with men, hence, Lina particularly warns Florens about the real intentions of the blacksmith. However, Florens continues to remain blindly in love with him. There is also the role of her having being abandoned in the past by her own mother, and witnessed the feeling of being unwanted that Florens does not want to give-up on her new-found love and affection.

While Blacksmith is engaged with his professional activity of building a fence at the farm, Sorrow falls ill with smallpox. The Blacksmith heals her with his healing powers. This happens almost like a miracle. However, he leaves the farm after completing his work, while he does not inform Florens about this. This leads to Florens being absolutely heartbroken in her life, that too, for the second time. She feels completely unwanted.

Sorrow becomes pregnant while Jacob contracts smallpox. All the men working at the farm are scared of contracting smallpox so they leave. Scully and Willy are also not allowed near Jacob for the fear of being infected by the disease. Jacob's last wish before his death was to be taken into his new mansion where he could die with peace and tranquility. The women take him to the house where he passes away. However, his wife Rebekka discovers later that she too has become infected with the disease.

Rebekka was an intelligent woman and she does not lose control of the situation. She asks Florens to go and seek the Blacksmith for she remembers how he cured Sorrow with his miraculous healing power. Florens starts her expedition on a look-out for the blacksmith. While on her journey, Florens comes across the house of widow Ealing and Jane, her daughter. They offer shelter to Florens. During her stay at the widow's house, Florens witnesses that the people in the village believed that the widow was a devil. The villagers came over to the widow's house to see Florens, because of her dark colour, they accuse her of being a devil also, she runs away from this accommodation lest the villagers would attack her.

This reflects on the underpinnings of the 17th century American society in which they believed that women with a dark skin were actually demons or devils. At the same time they had no respect for women co-existing with them in the society. They beat them brutally and assaulted them sexually. The basic respect

towards the women in the society was lacking. In such an environment, it became increasingly difficult for women to have an honorable life.

After facing much ado, Florens reaches the Blacksmith's abode. She informs him about Rebekka's illness. The Blacksmith had adopted a son, Malaik in the meantime. He asks Florens to take care of his son, while he would go and cure Rebekka and come back to his house. The Blacksmith sets out to attend Rebekka. Florens feels jealous of blacksmith's son because she wants his undivided love and attention.

While the blacksmith is away, Florens is reminded about her mother's choice, in which she chooses her brother over her. She becomes all the more scared of Malaik and watches him with increased suspicion, as she feels that he would take the better of her relationship with the blacksmith and the latter would give him priority over her. Malaik started crying increasingly one day, with all this in the backdrop; Florens pulled him by his arm and broke it. At the same time, the Blacksmith came back and witnessed the whole incident. He didn't know how to react and in a fit of fury he hit Florens and asked her to leave his house. Florens could not bear blacksmith's temper so she hit him back with tongs and left him bleeding.

On her way back, Florens feels traumatised and discarded. She runs barefoot in the forest towards Jacob's farm, her only house. However, she feels much better when she reaches home. She finds that Rebekka has been healed of her illness. The farm had grown into a wilderness and needed to be attended. Willy and Scully help them around by restoring the farm to its earlier glory.

Rebekka assumes a new attitude after recovering from her illness. She now changes her attitude towards Lina and Sorrow, whom she treats with harshness, she also intends to sell Florens as a slave to another family. Florens also changes increasingly as she loses the love and affection of the blacksmith. She always has the feeling of being abandoned by her mother and then later by her love interest. She feels unwanted and undesired by all, she is never able to understand the feeling of selfless and unconditional love of her mother, who abandoned Florens for her wellbeing and for keeping her secure from the brutality at D'Ortega's.

A *Mercy* speaks of the struggle of all the women characters in the 17th century. Florens having been a child of slavery in Maryland who had been sold to Jacob Vaark at a tender age of eight. She falls in love when she is sixteen which is the time when she commits herself to the blacksmith. The whole of her being is devoted to her love for the blacksmith who eventually abandons her.

Lina is another woman of American origin who is brought up by colonizers just after the epidemic in her village. She becomes free in the beginning of her teenage but does not have any judicial rights of belonging to her tribe. She is also the first woman to start working on Vaark's farm. She has a dexterous arm at increasing the produce at the farm which adds to its over-all productivity.

Rebekka, Jacob Vaark's wife is a free woman and a white. She belongs to a family of eight siblings in lower-town London. She survived the filthy conditions in London and gets married to Jacob at the tender age of sixteen. As she had an adjusting nature she continues to bear with all the vagaries at the Vaark farm. As she fits the bill of being an ideal woman and an ideal wife according to the conventions of seventeenth century America, she is always cherished as a wife by her husband and also as a mistress by all her farmhands.

Sorrow who is always in a sorry state, her name synonymous with her state, comes to the shore after a ship is overturned. However, she is saved and raised by Sawyer. She comes to the Vaark farm when she is not even a teenager but she is already pregnant. She gives birth to a stillborn child and suffers from a depression after the whole episode. Most women of seventeenth century America were sexually assaulted and became unwed mothers. She contracts small pox at the Vaark farm and is cured by the Blacksmith. The squalid health conditions led to epidemics and plagues frequently, being weak, women naturally were the easiest victims.

Florens' mother, Minha Mae is a West African born woman who is purchased as a slave under the custom of chattel slavery after her village runs into a battle with another village. She is later purchased by D'Ortega for working at his plantation in Maryland. Hence, Ortega brings her from Barbados to Maryland where she starts working at his tobacco plantation. She gives birth to Florens and a son. She sends Florens away when Jacob Vaark comes to settle his debt with D'Ortega.

The main factor for concern is gender dynamics. When the novel, *A Mercy* is studied from the perspective of gender and the way it has its place in determining roles in the society, the women are assigned a specific place in the novel. They are expected to fulfill their roles as slaves and as mothers. Patriarchy always places a dominant role in deciding what roles Florens, Minha Mae, Sorrow, Lina and Rebekka should ascribe to. Their roles have been limited to that of simply caregivers to their families, working on the Vaark farm, being playmates for their male counterparts. They are always expected to conform to their specific roles in water-tight compartments.

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