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Nihilistic Delusions of Mother's Love: Morrison's *Beloved* and *Mercy*

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Abstract: The present research paper aims to explore the Nihilistic Delusions of black mothers in the chosen novel of Toni Morrison. Nihilistic Delusion, also known as 'delires de negation', is a psycho-pathological entities characterized by a belief that there is no future for the patient. Here, the justification of this title is that it is not only the belief of the unfortunate poor and black mothers but a certainty that the future holds no hope for them or for their children. It is horrible hence better to wipe out their progeny than to allow them to suffer the same excruciating pain and endless agony.

Morrison, in her world-acclaimed novels like *Beloved* and *Mercy*, which are ironically based on realities, tries to bring back the left-out memories of the past, of the blacks, especially black mothers. The researcher, through this paper, tries to highlight Morrison's views regarding her woman characters in her world accolade novels.

Keywords- Africa, America, Black mothers, Privileged, Re-memory, Voice.

In her seminal essay *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1993), Morrison says if we want to understand the national literature of America, this fact must be considered that:

There seems to be more or less tacit agreement among literary scholars that because American literature clearly has been the preserve of white male views, genius, and power, those views, genius, and powers are without relationship to and removed from the overwhelming presence of black people in the United States...The contemplation of this black presence is central to any understanding of our national literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins of the literary imagination (5).

A Mercy is Morrison's ninth fiction, published in 2008. Reading the fiction, one is easily reminded of *Beloved*, which delineates a mother's selfless love for her children. She has suffered horribly as a slave, and she cannot allow her children to go through the same inhuman experiences. Hence, instead, she slits the throat of her own newborn than to be a slave. As a reader, one can imagine the situation which forces a mother to murder her own child! Very recently, the entire world stood as a mute witness when mothers in Afghanistan threw their infants in the laps of unknown soldiers in the hope that their children will have a better tomorrow than in their homeland! In this novel also, a mother sells her daughter to a man, Jacob Vaark, to pay some debt but with a hope and motherly instinct that she will be having a better future with her owner than her mother can provide. It is the love and mercy of mothers, black mothers, and slave mothers that compel them to either kill or sell their beloveds. But with all of their good intentions, these mothers are not forgiven by their daughters till the last.

And, in speaking of these girls, she (Morrison) sheds light on a painful paradox: while they experience their girlhoods mired in physical, psychological, and sexual abuse, as well as neglect, these girls, more often than not, are robbed of their girlhoods in a struggle for survival... Toni Morrison's disrupted girls most powerfully register her angry protest against a gender system that designates a woman a secondary rank and against a social system that effortlessly overlooks what befalls a poor (black) female child. Thus, in her world of fiction, Heeds are seduced into unhappiness; Jadines are brainwashed by the assumed superiority of white culture;

Sulas need to fight back to survive; Pecolas are raped; Sorrows are preyed upon; Beloveds are murdered (Roye 212-227).

A Mercy reflects a complex scenario of several girls who come from multiple and unmatched classes. But one thing is common in their story, and that is the vulnerability of young girls, which led to a certain and definite breakage in their lives. Whether white or black or brown, the color of the skin does not make any difference. The factor binding and providing them the same fate is common to all that is their sex, their female biology. Florens is the central protagonist who is given away by her mother in the hope of a better future for her to another master, though she knows ‘there is no protection, but there is difference’. Sorrow is another girl child of a dead ship captain. As she has no one to lean on, people constantly misbehave with her, taking her to be as dumb. Lina is another character who belongs to Native America, but she is uprooted from her own culture and never gets establishment with another. The extreme poverty of the family compels the parents to choose an unknown suitor for Rebekka, their own daughter. It was a kind of good riddance for them. All the girls suffer neglect and abandonment from an early age, either because of poverty or providence or both. Their milieus and conditions may differ, but their fate is all the same. “Rebekka, by virtue of being white, is superior to others and is therefore considered to be more privileged; yet, Morrison takes us back into her past to reveal her unhappy, disrupted upbringing. Florens’s abandonment by her slave mother is as painful as that of Rebekka by hers. Hence, bringing together black, white, or brown girls in the novel, Morrison exposes and explores their amputated girlhoods” (Roye 212-227). The farm of Jacob Vaark reminds us of the Convent in *Paradise* that provides a temporary haven for the girls who have escaped the cruel hands of destiny which was nothing if not a complete menu of destruction for them.

The novel *A Mercy* opens with a portentous note, “Don’t be afraid. My telling cannot hurt you” (1) and then “Stranger things happen all the time everywhere. You know. I know you know. One question is who is responsible? Another is can you read?” (1). Perhaps the question is who is responsible if a Minha Mae gives her daughter to a stranger or a Sethe kills her daughter? And then the irony can the telling or recounting of the suffering be so much hurting that it cannot be allowed to be retold?

The novel starts with the journey of Florence as a black slave girl, but she returns back from this journey as a free woman, at least from within. Thus, this journey liberates her. Sometimes, one is born a slave, but sometimes, you become a slave of your passion and addiction. Florence is a born slave who again becomes a slave of her passion for the blacksmith, a free black man. Thus, she is doubly enslaved. But like twice-born (literally, once when her mother gave her birth and second when she emerges out of the dark womb of desire, disillusioned but free), she survives all odds meted out to her by life “because the soles of her feet are hard as cypress” (159).

Florens, born of an African slave mother, becomes part of the household of Jacob Vaark, a trading man who “was determined to prove that his own industry could amass the fortune, without trading his conscience for coin” (26). He goes to D’Ortega to claim his money that was lent to him, but D’Ortega is unable to pay his debt in money owing to his lavish lifestyle. Though, he is ready to pay his debt by offering a slave to Jacob. At that, Jacob feels revulsion thinking that ‘flesh was not his commodity’. And then, on a whim and just to silence D’Ortega, he points to a slave woman with two children, a baby boy and a little girl. But D’Ortega refuses for she was her best cook and something more as well. All between the while, the slave woman watching Jacob, suddenly came forward and, in a voice that was so urgent that Jacob could not ignore, it said, “Please, Senhor. Not me. Take her. Take my daughter” (24) and Jacob ‘was struck by the terror in her eyes’ thinking God help me if this is not the most wretched business’ (24). He said no, but the woman ‘knelt and closed her eyes’ as if praying to the providence for help, for the rescue of her daughter. Years later, this slave woman, Minah Mae, Florence’s mother, tries to justify it to herself as well as to Florence, who, of course, is not there to listen.

She recalls when she first saw Jacob that “his way is another way” and that “there was no animal in his heart” (161). As a black, slave woman, she knows that there is no hope for women like her, no tomorrow. Then she utters the almost universal truth “I think men thrive on insults over cattle, women, water, crops” (161). Then remembers the horrors of slavery, of what she has suffered, re-living as if in a trance. This reminds us of the speech of Beloved, who speaks of the infamous journey to the South when asked by her sister Denver.

“Bound with vine one to another we are moved four times, each time more trading, more culling, more dying...it was there (Barbados) I learned how I was not a person from my country, nor from my families. I was Negrita. Everything. Language, dress, gods, dance, habits...cooked together in the color of my skin. So, it was as a black that I was purchased ...” (163). Florence is the result of rape by some unknown man and her brother too. And Minha Mae does not want the same fate for her daughter, who was transforming very fast from a little girl to an adolescent one. She knew that D’Ortega is eying her daughter as a piece of flesh. When meets Jacob, she “saw that the tall man see you as a human child, not pieces of eight. I knelt before him. Hoping for a miracle. He said yes. It was not a miracle. Bestowed by God. It was *a mercy*. Offered by human.

I stayed on my knees. In the dust where my heart will remain each night and each day until you understand what I know and long to tell you...Oh, Florence. My love. Hear a tua mae" (165).

But Florence is not aware of the suffering of a mother's heart, and all the while, she thinks that she was discarded by her mother or her mother did choose her brother over her. She is not even aware that it was not a kind of choice for her mother but rather her deep love for her daughter, her concern for a better future which she was unable to provide for herself. Mercy and love of mothers result in abandonment and trauma. When she suffers the same kind of rejection through the blacksmith who chooses Malaik over her, Florence becomes emotionally violent for a while and sees herself perpetually unchosen and unprotected. But it is the rejection that ultimately brings any kind of closure and emotional balance.

This paper discusses first *A Mercy* and then *Beloved* because the mercy of a mother takes her daughter from her, but the love and devotion of a mother culminates in the murder of her beloved.

Beloved won Toni Morrison the 1988 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. It is her most read, most analyzed and widely accepted creation. Here, "Morrison re-tells history through the lives of ordinary people with women characters who struggle in a world created for the convenience of others. Through these characters and the lives of those around them, readers learn a history that cannot be found in textbooks" (Nigro 17-18), in newspapers, maybe!

Beloved explores the emotional legacy of slavery among Black people in the United States. Set in the years before, during and after the American Civil War, it centers on three generations of Black Women, Baby Suggs, a woman freed from slavery, her daughter-in-law Sethe, who escapes to the North from vicious slave owners in Kentucky, and Sethe's daughter Denver, raised in freedom but scarred by her inheritance. They are haunted by the ghost of Beloved, another daughter whom Sethe murdered to save her from being raised in slavery. The novel weaves their memories as they come to terms with their personal and collective past (p. 100-101).

Sethe is not alone in her suffering. The torture of slavery grips the subconscious of every -African-American.

Morrison's decision to publish *Beloved* was a conscious decision, as she wanted to open the wounds of the past so that it can be cured in the present. Ignoring it was not possible. She wanted the world to know about the wrongs done to the aboriginal Africans. *Beloved* is the saga of the pain and emotional trauma suffered by the former slaves...Sethe, Paul D, Baby Suggs, Halle and Stamp paid. Halle, Sethe's husband was the son of Baby Suggs, who works even on holidays so that he can earn his mother's freedom. But he himself did not survive slavery. The experiences of these slaves were so terrible and grotesque that they trembled even to remember what was so shameful and so dangerous. Sethe could not find peace in her freedom because she was haunted by the memory of the baby she had killed. Sethe uses a behavioral strategy to deal with her personal trauma arising from the murder of her own daughter.

Her primary coping mode entails separating herself from authentic seeing and feeling through an attempt ... albeit an unsuccessful one ... to repress traumatic memories her secondary strategy arises from the first she withdraws from any involvement with her community. Through her self-imposed psychological numbness, she appears to preserve an apparent...if superficial...calm that allows her to focus solely, if blindly, on everyday affairs in her present life with her surviving daughter, Denver (Salvatore Anne T. "Toni Morrison's New Bildungsroman...")

Morrison's *Beloved* was inspired by a few stories that she had heard from different places. In 1974 Morrison took up an important project, the editorship of *The Black Book*. While doing research for *The Black Book*, she read a news clipping in which an actual incident was mentioned. In the year 1850s, a woman named Margaret Garner, who escaped slavery from Kentucky, was traced to Ohio and caught by pro-slavery authorities in a small settlement outside of Cincinnati. Not wanting to return into the hackles of slavery, she killed one of her three children, and if not for people, she would have killed all her three children.

Morrison was shocked so much so that she wanted to unravel the suffering creatively. This information was the kernel from which *Beloved* was created in the late 1980s. Margaret Garner, the mother, chose death over life of slavery. Morrison has transformed the history of Margaret Garner into a myth in *Beloved*. Margaret Garner represents feminine selflessness which we see mythified and embodied in the character of Sethe. A man named Stamp Paid, also a former slave who helps fugitive slaves to cross the river Ohio, says that Sethe killed Beloved because she "was trying to out hurt the hurters", because she loved her children to a point of obsession. Paul D's advice to her was not to love too much but to "love just a little bit" so that when the slave owners took whatever or whoever the slave loved and "broke its back or shoved it in a croakin sack, well, maybe you'd have a little love left over for the next one" (*Beloved* 45). When Paul D comes to know of Sethe murdering her own baby, he accuses her that her love is "too thick". But she is convinced that either "Love is or it ain't. Thin love ain't love at all". Paul D, in spite of all his philosophy, is able to understand what Sethe means. "He knew exactly what she meant: to get to a place where you could love anything you chose...not to need permission for desire...well now, that was freedom" (162).

Sethe did not want to take any risk any more. She had had enough. Her masters had beaten her up, raped her, taken her milk and shredded her back open so that it looked like a tree, a chokecherry tree. The description of the scars on Sethe's back, which were done by the Schoolteacher's nephews when they stripped her and shredded her back open, appears like a tree in a fantasy tale, but in reality, it underlines the horrors of slavery. How could she have stayed on to suffer and let her children suffer forever?

Sethe's mother had also suffered the same fate, and she also did the same thing, i.e., infanticide. Sethe's grandmother recounts the past to Sethe and says, "She threw them all away but you... Without names, she threw them" (62). The excessive love of a helpless mother could do nothing but to kill her own children to protect them from a tortuous future in slavery.

Beloved is the name given to the grown-up ghost of the infant who was murdered by Sethe, a runaway slave. Sethe, who fled to Ohio with her children, has just begun a free life when the slave catchers find her and are about to take her and her children back to Sweet Home, the plantation from which she escaped. Rather than allow her children to experience the horrors of slavery, she plans to kill them and herself. She murders her as-yet-unnamed baby, slitting her throat, but is stopped by a former slave named Stamp Paid before she can fulfil her plan. Considering Sethe insane and, therefore, not fit for work, the slave catchers leave without her or her children. The murdered child is remembered on her gravestone simply as *Beloved*. Sethe serves time in prison and is released (Singh 105).

Also, according to Abhilasha Singh:

The murdered infant, however, cannot be forgotten as the baby's ghost playfully roams the house, knocking over objects, generally making its presence known. Although always present, the spirit of the baby seems content to remain a ghost until Paul D, also a refugee of Sweet Home, threatens to become the focus of Sethe's life. Just as Paul D appears in Sethe's life, Beloved emerges from the water as the young woman she would have become. She makes her way into Sethe's home and her life, driving out Paul D as she demands more and more love and attention from her mother (106).

"As her sister Denver attempts to learn of Beloved's past life, she asks where she lived before coming to Bluestone Road" (Nigro 18-19). She asks, "What was it like over there, where you were before"? (75) Beloved replies, "Dark. Hot. Nothing to breathe down there and no room to move it" (75). Denver prods on, asking, "Did you see anybody"? She says, "Heaps. Lots of people down there. Some is dead" (77).

"The living ghost represents not only the spirit of Sethe's murdered infant, but of the African mother, Sethe never knew as well as the spirits of those who came to these shores, enduring the infamous middle passage. Beloved speaks of the ordeal of the crossing. She speaks for the restless souls who were crammed into the holds of ships:" (Nigro 18-19).

I am always crouching—the man on my face is dead—his face is not mine—his mouth smells sweet, but his eyes are locked—some who eat nasty themselves—I do not eat—the men without skin bring us their morning water to drink—we have none—at night I cannot see the dead man on my face—daylight comes through the cracks, and I can see his locked eyes—I am not big—small rats do not wait for us to sleep—someone is thrashing, but there is no room to do it in—if we had more to drink we could make tears—we are all trying to leave our bodies behind (210).

Beloved and Minha Mae speak the same language of torture and inhuman suffering, "Mostly we slept or wept... then the whitened men placed we in canoes... each water river or sea has sharks under... when the canoe heeled, some of us we jumped, others were pulled under, and we did not see their blood swirl until we alive ones were retrieved and placed under guard... unreason prevails here... who lives, who dies? (*A Mercy* 163). Beloved speaks in fragments as the novel is told in fragments. The pieces of the story must be carefully put together by the reader as the story is too painful to be remembered or to be told in its entirety. Beloved has returned to claim the love of her mother that she was denied, and to inflict the additional guilt on the woman who deprived her of life and love so many years ago. Her obsession grows until Sethe barely has strength to move. As the mother gives all that she has to the increasingly demanding ghost/child, her physical and mental health are close to the breaking point. At the same time, Beloved, fed by Sethe's guilt and love, is gaining strength and growing physically (Nigro 18-19).

Denver recognizes the danger Beloved represented. It was the danger of the resurrected past taking over the present. Beloved represents a spiritual force that is trying to choke Sethe. Denver realizes that the slavery past has become a demon and is squeezing the life out of her mother's present. Denver understands now and listens to the admonition of Baby Suggs and abandons 124. She finds work and the friendship of other human beings in the community.

She shares her terrible experience with the community and seeks help for her mother from the community outside her home. Her love for her mother is an affirmation that she can lead Sethe from the trap of the past into a healthy present. "Whatever Sethe had done; Ella didn't like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present" (315). Ella was a practical person. Ella leads the women first to pray for Sethe and

then on a mission to exorcise the ghost. Thirty women walked towards 124. They brought along with them simple “Christian faith—as shield and sword” and also many other things...The women gather outside the house at 124 and begin singing. The women’s voices exorcise the ghost of Beloved. Beloved practically disintegrates and melts away, and Sethe is carried from a cursed end to a new beginning.

“In Morrison’s novel, the ghost of Beloved as a returned spirit speaks for all those lost souls who suffered and died during the middle passage. She speaks as one and as the voice of many as she describes the slave ships and their journey:” (Nigro 19-20) “we are not crouching now—we are standing, but my legs are like my dead man’s eyes—I cannot fall because there is no room to —the men without skin are making loud noises—I am not dead—the bread is sea colored—I am too hungry to eat it—the sun closes my eyes—those able to die are in a pile...I want the face that is mine” (211).

“It is through Beloved’s childlike and fragmented remembrance that the reader must face the terrible horrors in the holds of the slave ships. In her essay ‘Rootedness’, Toni Morrison says that “she sees the lives of a solitary person as representative of a culture of his or her ‘tribe’” (Nigro 19-20). She writes, “My sense of the novel is that it has always functioned for the class or the group that wrote it” (p. 340). “She believes that novel should be “beautiful and powerful, but it should also work. It should have something in it that enlightens” (p. 341). However, she adds, “the best art is political, unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time” (p. 345).

“*Beloved* embodies both the suffering and guilt of the past as well as the power and beauty of the past. There is a need to realize the past fully in order to have a future that is full of possibilities” (Singh 111). Morrison’s *Beloved* is a symbol that forces us to face the historical past as a living and vindictive presence. Through the scene of exorcism, Morrison presents Beloved not as a ghost exorcised by a collective prayer but as the needy child demanding her right. Denver represents hope in the novel: she is the daughter of history who lives with the past and finally is able to break away from it, to rise above it towards a future full of hope and possibilities.

Both the novels of Morrison trace the trauma of mothers whose love and instinct to protect their children are so great that they would eliminate the objects of their love from their lives rather than allow them to suffer and be soiled by some destructive forces like slavery.

Who is going to re-write the present of those unfortunate Afghani mothers who chose to discard their newborns, dreaming of a better future for them! And what if those children return back as young ones and accuse their unnamed mothers of their ‘CRIMES’ of - abandonment and deprivation! Who will be centring the voice of these miserable and wretched mothers, cursed by the lusty politics for power! These are some of the unanswered questions which the present paper is raising in the hope that maybe the future will be more kind towards these luckless mothers if the present is not.

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