



A Study on Slave Trade in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*

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Abstract

Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*, set in the late 17th century American colonies, delves into the nascent stages of the transatlantic slave trade and other forms of human bondage, painting a complex picture of a society grappling with the concept of ownership and the brutal realities of exploitation. While not as centrally focused on the established racialized chattel slavery of her later novel *Beloved*, *A Mercy* powerfully portrays the insidious beginnings of this system and its profound impact on individuals and communities. The novel showcases a fluid and often brutal landscape of human trade. Florens, the central figure, is given as payment for a debt, highlighting the commodification of human life. Her mother's desperate act, driven by a desire to protect Florens from the sexual predation of their owner, underscores the lack of agency and the constant threat of violence faced by enslaved people. This act of "mercy," twisted by the dehumanizing context of slavery, sets the stage for Florence's yearning for connection and her struggle for self-worth in a world that views her as property. Morrison expands the scope of human trade beyond the African slave trade. The novel features Lina, a Native American woman enslaved after the decimation of her tribe by disease, and Sorrow, a white indentured servant whose past is shrouded in mystery and trauma. These characters highlight the diverse forms of bondage prevalent in the early colonies, where race was not yet the sole determinant of enslavement. Their shared experiences of loss, displacement, and forced labor underscore the pervasive nature of exploitation and the fragility of human dignity in this formative period.

Keywords:

Introduction

The central theme of Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* revolves around the complex and often brutal nature of human bondage in its various forms in 17th-century colonial America, before racialized slavery became the dominant system. Morrison explores how different kinds of servitude – including chattel slavery, indentured servitude, and even the subtle forms of dependency and obligation – shape the lives and relationships of her diverse cast of characters. (Elizabeth, 2021)

The novel is set in a period where the lines between different types of bondage were not yet rigidly defined by race. White indentured servants, Native Americans forced into labor, and enslaved Africans all experience different facets of unfreedom and exploitation. Morrison highlights this fluidity to challenge the later, more entrenched understanding of American slavery as solely a racial issue.

The novel delves into the psychological toll of being owned or controlled by another. Characters grapple with their lack of agency, their longing for autonomy, and the ways in which their identities are shaped by their status. Florens' desperate need for connection and her fear of "looseness" (her term for freedom) exemplify this internal struggle.

Morrison portrays how individuals, regardless of their background, are treated as commodities to be bought, sold, traded, and used for labor. This dehumanization affects their sense of self-worth and their ability to form healthy relationships. Florens' mother's "mercy" in giving her daughter away is a stark example of the choices made within a system that devalues human life.

The various forms of bondage create a web of interconnected destinies. The characters on Jacob Vaark's farm, despite their different backgrounds and statuses, are bound together by their shared experience of living under a system of control and obligation. Their interactions reveal the complexities of power dynamics and the precariousness of their positions. (Lynn, 2020)

Despite the constraints of their circumstances, the characters in *A Mercy* often seek small acts of resistance and try to carve out some form of agency for themselves. Florens' attempts to communicate through writing on the walls, Lina's preservation of her Native

American traditions, and Rebekka's evolving understanding of her own spiritual freedom are all expressions of this human desire for self-determination.

Ultimately, *A Mercy* serves as a powerful exploration of the foundational injustices upon which America was built. By examining the various forms of human bondage in this early period, Morrison reveals the insidious nature of unfreedom and its lasting impact on individuals and the development of the nation's social fabric. The novel compels readers to consider the broader spectrum of exploitation and the enduring human cost of one person owning another.

Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*, set in the nascent years of American colonialism, delves into the intricate psychological landscape shaped by various forms of unfreedom. Long before the rigid racialization of slavery took hold, the novel portrays a society where bondage is fluid, yet its impact on the human psyche remains devastatingly profound. Through the experiences of characters like Florens, Lina, Sorrow, and even the seemingly free Rebekka Vaark, Morrison masterfully illustrates how the absence of autonomy, security, and self-determination leaves indelible scars on the individual and collective consciousness.

Florens, the young slave girl gifted as payment for a debt, embodies the raw psychological trauma of abandonment and objectification. Torn from her mother's ambiguous "mercy," she grapples with a deep-seated insecurity and a desperate need for connection. Her unfreedom manifests as a yearning for control over her own narrative and body, a control consistently denied. Her passionate, almost obsessive, attachment to the blacksmith becomes a desperate attempt to define herself through another, highlighting the psychological distortion caused by her lack of agency. The fear of further abandonment and the internalized belief in her own worthlessness, stemming from her enslaved status, shape her interactions and ultimately lead to tragic consequences. (Montgomery, 2019)

Review of Literature

Valerie et al. (2021): The character of Jacob Vaark, a landowner who reluctantly accepts Florens, embodies the complex relationship between burgeoning wealth and the exploitation of human beings. While he doesn't actively participate in the large-scale slave trade, his acquisition of Florens as a transaction reveals the insidious normalization of human ownership. His desire for land and prosperity is intertwined with the forced labor of

those bound to him, illustrating how the developing colonial economy was deeply rooted in various forms of unfreedom.

Andrew et al. (2019): Lina, the Native American woman enslaved after the decimation of her tribe, carries the psychological weight of cultural annihilation and forced assimilation. Her unfreedom is not just physical but also spiritual and cultural. The loss of her people, her land, and her traditions leaves her with a profound sense of displacement and a constant vigilance against further loss. While she finds a semblance of belonging within Jacob's household, the underlying trauma of her past and the precariousness of her position as a captive continue to shape her worldview, fostering a quiet resilience tinged with melancholy.

Marianne et al. (2019): Sorrow, the white indentured servant with a fragmented past and an unstable sense of self, reveals that unfreedom transcends racial boundaries. Her experiences of shipwreck, abandonment, and sexual exploitation leave her with a fractured identity and a desperate search for stability. Her multiple "births" and shifting names signify a profound psychological disorientation, a consequence of being constantly subjected to external forces beyond her control. Her reliance on fleeting relationships for validation underscores the damage inflicted by a life lived without a secure sense of self, a common psychological outcome of prolonged unfreedom.

Slave trade in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*

A Mercy subtly hints at the evolving racial dynamics that would solidify the transatlantic slave trade as a system primarily based on race. The fear and prejudice Florens encounters during her journey to find the blacksmith foreshadow the hardening racial lines and the increasing dehumanization of people of African descent. The novel suggests that the early forms of human bondage, while diverse, laid the groundwork for the brutal and enduring system of racialized slavery that would come to define American history.

Morrison masterfully connects these individual psychological landscapes to the broader societal context of emerging colonial America. The novel illustrates how the very act of establishing a hierarchical society based on power and subjugation inevitably breeds psychological distress, not only in the enslaved but also in those who wield the power. The constant negotiation of dominance and submission, the fear of rebellion, and the moral

compromises inherent in maintaining unfreedom create a pervasive atmosphere of anxiety and unease.

In *A Mercy*, unfreedom is not merely a physical state but a profound psychological burden that shapes identity, distorts relationships, and leaves lasting scars on the human spirit. Through the nuanced portrayal of her characters, Toni Morrison reveals the insidious ways in which the denial of liberty erodes the self, leaving individuals vulnerable to trauma, isolation, and a desperate search for meaning and connection in a world that denies their fundamental humanity. The novel serves as a potent reminder of the enduring psychological impact of all forms of unfreedom, a legacy that continues to resonate across time and social structures.

In Toni Morrison's "A Mercy," the commodification of human beings is a central and disturbing theme, illustrating the brutal realities of the nascent stages of American slavery and other forms of human bondage in the late 17th century. Morrison meticulously portrays individuals reduced to mere property, their bodies and lives subject to the whims and economic interests of others. Through the experiences of various characters, the novel reveals the multifaceted ways in which human beings are stripped of their inherent value and treated as objects of transaction.

Florens, the young slave girl given as payment for a debt, embodies the most direct form of commodification. Her mother's desperate plea, "Take my child," highlights the horrific calculus of slavery where a parent chooses to sacrifice a child for a chance at a less brutal existence. Florence's journey through the novel is marked by her longing for connection and her struggle to understand her own worth in a world that has deemed her a possession. Her literacy, a skill learned against the norms of the time, becomes a testament to her inherent humanity that resists complete objectification.

The character of Jacob Vaark, though not a traditional slave owner in the later mold, participates in the system of commodification. Initially hesitant to own slaves, he ultimately accepts Florens as a means of settling a debt. His evolving attitude towards land and ownership mirrors a broader societal shift towards valuing property over people. His interactions with the Portuguese slave trader D'Ortega further expose the callous economic calculations that underpin the slave trade, where human lives are discussed in terms of their potential for labor and reproduction.

Other characters in the novel also experience forms of commodification. Lina, the Native American woman, is bought as a laborer after the decimation of her tribe. The indentured servants, Willard and Scully, are also treated as property for a fixed period, their labor and lives controlled by their masters. Rebekka, Jacob's wife, is in a sense commodified through the "mail-order bride system," where she is exchanged for passage and the promise of a new life.

Morrison does not limit commodification to the outright ownership of enslaved people. She extends the concept to the ways in which individuals are valued or devalued based on their gender, race, and social standing. Women, particularly women of color, are especially vulnerable to being treated as objects of sexual desire and exploitation. The threat of sexual violence looms over Florens's mother's decision to give her away, and the vulnerability of female bodies under the patriarchal and exploitative systems of the time is a constant undercurrent in the narrative.

Even Rebekka Vaark, the white mistress of the household, experiences a form of unfreedom within the patriarchal constraints of her time and her arranged marriage. Though not enslaved in the traditional sense, she is bound by societal expectations and the limitations placed upon women. Her emotional isolation and her longing for a connection that transcends the transactional nature of her marriage reveal the psychological toll of a life where personal desires are subjugated to social and economic imperatives. Her anxieties about her position and her fear of the unknown wilderness mirror the underlying insecurity that permeates the lives of those more overtly unfree.

Through the intricate relationships and individual narratives in "A Mercy," Morrison critiques the dehumanizing effects of commodification. She explores the psychological and emotional toll on those who are treated as property, as well as the moral compromises of those who participate in such systems. The novel serves as a powerful reminder of the human cost of reducing individuals to mere commodities and the enduring struggle for recognition of inherent human dignity.

Conclusion

While *A Mercy* is not solely about the transatlantic slave trade in its fully developed form, it offers a crucial glimpse into its origins and the broader context of human trade in the early American colonies. Through the experiences of Florens, Lina, and Sorrow, Morrison exposes the dehumanizing impact of treating human beings as commodities and foreshadows the devastating consequences of a system that would eventually become deeply entrenched and defined by race. The novel serves as a powerful reminder of the complex and often brutal foundations upon which the nation was built, urging readers to confront the uncomfortable truths of its past.

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