

CHAPTER-III

A Mercy: A Way Ahead

As the topic requires the deliberation of the changing dialectics in *The Bluest Eye* and *A Mercy*, it is pertinent first to discuss the main perspective of the novelist in the novel *A Mercy*. In this work, Morrison frames the story by narrating primarily the life of a young slave girl Florens who fails to realize the truth of her abandonment by her mother. In the beginning, she being the narrator keeps on telling the incidents by stating, “Strange things happen all the time everywhere. You know. I know you know. One question is who is responsible? Another is can you read?” (1) This statement makes the commencement of the narrative which accelerates the story forward. Young Florens has been offered to a trader as a debt. This brings one back to the roots of slavery. In the real sense of the word, this novel depicts the nature of slave trades in different transaction. Here, the characters are not only involved into one type of activity—plantation; rather many scopes of business and trades like farming, hunting, trading fascinate the characters most. Jacob Vaark, a ratty orphan in his childhood becomes a landowner by making ‘a place out of no place’ (10). His whole life has been a mix of confrontation, risk and full of adventures. By describing the trades and other transaction, the novelist reveals the materialistic mindset such in the case of Senhor D’ Ortega, his wife Mrs. Ortega and owners of the slave trade. These characters have no other motive but to achieve more profit through their slaves.

Unlike earlier novels, Morrison deliberates that it is not only black who is slave; many of the first Americans are indentured servants from all over Europe. In *A Mercy*, the characters notified as slaves, have their roots not only in African ancestry but in various races. This includes Lina, a Native American woman whose village has been victimized by smallpox; Sorrow a white woman; the only survivor of a shipwreck and Florens, African girl who has been accepted as a payment of a debt. Two male indentured servants Willard and Scully have also their roots in the white race. In contrary to *Beloved*, the novelist projects the master Jacob Vaark as benevolent, kindhearted fellow. He has the healthy relation with their servants. He never misbehaves with them. For instance, when he has to accept Florens, he does not think about his trading profit. He takes her only to console her wife as Florens resembles her daughter Patricia. The novel’s complexity deepens as Jacob agrees to settle the debt owed to him by acquiring Florens. This

brings Florens' life escaping from the cruelties' of D' Ortega's plantation to the homely attachment in Vaark's farm and transforms her life entirely.

Of course, *A Mercy* pictures the hopes and ambitions of those who travel to the new world pursuing the illusive dream of a perfect life. It is based on the truths of America during 1680s before slavery has truly begun and when America is just in its infancy. Here, slavery is examined through the prism of power, not race. While discussing her latest novel in an interview, Morrison clarifies her motif behind writing. In her view, "She wanted to separate race from slavery" (n.pag.). She has a desire to explore a period where one can experience being a slave without being 'raced.' The main consideration of the novel is highlighted during the conversation with NPR (National Public Radio). Morrison rejects the idea of racism on the ground that it fosters discrimination among creatures of God. She has been realizing it since her childhood. As a keynote speaker at the 1985 Princeton University Race Matters Conference, Morrison expresses her desire to influence the emergence of the world in which race has significance in terms of cultural and individual specificities, but does not imply or designate hierarchy. This resonates her latest novel *A Mercy*.

In her earlier novels, Morrison has intensified the dominance of white over the black. White supremacy is all the more important which constitutes the theme of the novels. For instance, *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* show the devastating effect of whiteness for a black person. But Morrison has moved on from there. Her novel *Tar Baby* leaves the impossible pursuit of whiteness and underlines the importance of Afro-American culture and ancestry. Her latest novel can be seen as a next step in Morrison's process of moving beyond racial lines. Race does not so much important for the characters as the enslavement of their own. For instance, the blacksmith in spite of being a black enjoys his life as a freedman. He has all freedom and security like the white man. He does not feel any sense of agony by seeing the evil of slavery. It seems that slavery has no impact over him. Despite it, he has an influential personality throughout the whole novel. No repulsion of hatredness is shown towards him for being black as it happens with Pecola and Sethe. The characters from the white society do not seem to despise the black. In other sense, the conflict between white and black seems invisible as no one believes in the notion of white being beautiful and black being ugly. These racial biases are completely excluded from the society where all the characters face the same problems.

Though this racial line has been disappeared, the evil of slavery in its infancy form of indentured labor appears in the novel. Here, the figures—Senghor D' Ortega, his wife and the owners of the slave trade --project the brutalization of the indentured labor. When Jacob goes to Jubilo in Maryland to owe his debt from D'Ortega, he faces the realities of the harsh world where humans are treated as animals as if they are devoid of any kind of feelings. The story of beating the horse is in actual the analogous in depicting the condition of bonded servants. The pain inflicted on the horse because of mute, silent, unprotesting surrender reflects the pain of the slave whose voice is not heard by his master. At Jubilo by seeing the condition of the slaves Jacob's heart starts vibrating with pain. When he comes to know that Ortega has the intention of paying his debt in the form of human flesh, he clearly denies by saying, 'flesh is not his commodity' (20). At this juncture, Ortega presents his own mentality by indicating slaves as a source of earning. Not only has he, his wife has also overlapped her spirit by the profit of earning by means of slavery. It clarifies that slaves are the commodity only for fulfilling their profits. Despite his revulsion at trading in human flesh, Vaark accepts a little young girl named Florens because he thinks that she may bring some consolation to her wife as she seems at the same age of Patrician, his daughter who dies at the age of five. Another reason in adopting Florens may be that being an orphan, he can easily understand the psychology of an orphan. "From his own childhood he knew there was no good place in the world for waifs and whelps other than the generosity of strangers" (30). This reveals the changing perception of the novelist regarding the outside gaze. For instance, in *The Bluest Eye*, the strangers along with the family members torture Pecola because of her blackness. She has nowhere any comfort in the world. But in opposition to, it is the stranger who rescues Florens from the brutality of the so called master. The preconceived image of the white man is destroyed by Vaark who regards the laws issued against the black people as completely unjust, lawless and lacking virtue. He not only represents mercy, but also a stable pole around which the other female characters orbit.

In the novel the main theme on which the novelist concentrates, is the idea that slavery is related to neither black nor white. It exists all over the world and affects every race. Morrison clearly reveals her reasoning behind the narrative strategy "Every civilization in the world relied on slavery... the only difference between African slaves and European or British slaves was that the latter could run away and melt into the population. But if you were black, you were noticeable" (NPR, n.pag.). The incidents of Ney brothers' wagon carries the malcontents who

desire to disregard their bond. At the very stage of adolescent, Florens is not able to understand the devastating effect of bonded labor. She considers that everyone has to work then why the slaves feel a sense of boredom in case of their labor. But she is corrected by a woman who narrates the real brutalization “There are no coffins in a tannery, only fast death in acid.” (35)

Though Willard and Scully do not suffer much as the slaves on D’Ortega’s plantation farm, they are still bonded servants in order to pay their debt. But here is not the gloomy picture of slavery. They are portrayed as the trustworthy fellow. Even, after the death of their master Jacob, they are ready to manage the things in the new built house. Throughout the whole novel, they do not cheat his mistress Rebbaka. This way Morrison has mirrored the condition of slaves by excluding racism from slavery which connotes a different type of perception than the earlier novels.

Undoubtedly, Morrison ties the stories of Florens, Sorrow, Rebekka and Lina together through Jacob in order to show how small a world we live in. All the characters thrown altogether by the traumatic circumstances have a desire to seek and find some sort of family bonds. At this point of time, they try to bind themselves with the thread of love. In Jacob’s presence, this thread is so strong that nobody can break it up. This family ties have a positive impact on the members living in the house. The female characters are under the supervision of Jacob who maintains a healthy relation with all of them. Florens is treated as his daughter, Sorrow in spite of being a slave is made to read and write along with sewing and Lina is the companion of Rebekka who remains always with her whenever his mistress is in trouble. Though Rebekka’s children die during birth, she rarely misses them. It is so because she has created a homely atmosphere within the house that lessens her sufferings.

A Mercy shows Morrison’s concern with home, subjectivity and recovery from trauma. The metaphor of home is also presented in *Beloved*, the house called Sweet Home is actually not sweet as it is haunted by the spirit of a daughter and the characters live inside it have no peace at all. Through this homely state, Morrison seems to delineate that it is the calm and peaceful setting that makes a home in the real sense. Sometimes, blood relations in comparison to love relations become less prominent in forming a family. People of different race or class can create the notion of ‘sweet home’ by supporting or loving one another. The concept of home originally relates to Sigmund Freud’s *Heimliche* and *unheimliche*. In his essay entitled ‘Das Unheimliche’(The Uncanny), Freud states that German *unheimliche* is the negation of the

adjective heimliche, derived from heim (home). Heimliche has two meanings- literally it is associated with domestic, friendly way. While metaphorically it relates to hidden, secret or clandestine incident. In positive sense, it takes the inside perspective of the intimacy of home. On the other hand, unheimliche is more negative as Freud considers a token of repression and is a space of irresolvable tension. The essay 'The Uncanny' (1919) describes Heimlich as "belonging to the house, not strange, familiar, tame, intimate, friendly." Unheimlich its opposite means "concealed, kept from insight, so that others do not get to know of or about it, withheld from others" (Freud, n.pag.). This way it is associated with secrecy and privacy by the uncanny¹ of the particular person. About the concept of home and homeless, Clare Marcus also states:

Home fulfills many needs: a place of self expression, a vessel of memories, a refuse from the outside world, a cocoon where we can feel nurtured and let down our guard. A person without a fixed abode is viewed with suspicion in our society, labeled 'vagrant,' 'hobo,' 'street person.' (57)

Of course, it provides a space for self- fulfillment, intimate and family relationships and privacy. In *A Mercy*, home created by the people belonging to different races and ancestry is always safe for the characters especially for females. It is a cocoon² rather than a site of domestic struggle. This is perceived as tension free and a place to escape social problems. In contrast to it, *The Bluest Eye* presents the situation at home entirely different. Home becomes the house which is fueled by the fire.

It appears that the idea of being put 'outdoors' from the house has been refuted in order to smooth the characters' lives in *A Mercy*. For instance, separated from her mother and brother, Florens gets affectionate environment which fills her heart with happiness. Unlike Pecola and Ruth, she faces no confrontation in the new and strange house. This way the novel presents the family ties and bonds in a very eloquent way. The significance of the home has also been depicted by other writers of the different canon. Nissim Ezekiel, the writer of Indian canon considers 'Home is where we have to gather grace.' It depicts the heimliche state proposed by Freud. But the unheimliche situation occurs in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* when the house carrying the same title is full of anger, hatred and jealousy. It mirrors the conditions of its inhabitants. In contrary to, Thrushcross Grange symbolizes the feelings of intimacy and attachment. Similarly, V.S. Naipaul also intensifies the importance of home. In *A House for Mr. Biswas*, he presents the protagonist who is in search of owning a home by acquiring a 'portion of

earth.’ This metaphor of home connotatively refers to love, affection and healthy relation among the people who live inside it. In the Prologue, Naipaul describes it as:

How terrible it would have been, at this time, to be without it... disintegrating and indifferent family... in one room; worse to have lived without even attempting to lay claim to one’s portion of earth, to have lived and died as one had been, unnecessary and unaccommodated. (4)

In *A Mercy*, Jacob treats women decently, and the hardship of life on the frontier turns them into a family. But when he becomes ill, the women confront the reality that they are not a part of family, rather they are a man’s property. They very well know that once Jacob is no more, it is only a matter of time before they are parceled off to other masters. One man’s mercy is the abandonment to the other. The separateness that Florens experiences at the psychological level leaves her with a scar pining for love all her life. Jacob’s farm gives her an illusion of belongingness. His household provides a venue to slave girls that share personal pains tighter in a bond of friendship. The mother-daughter relationship appears when Lina feels highly affectionate towards Florens. She protects her with maternal passion when she warns her of the perils involved in falling in love with charismatic blacksmith.

However, in the Jacob’s house, situation reverses and disintegration starts after his death. All the residents feel a sense of nothingness in the house. In spite of trying to create a suitable environment, nobody can deny the hollowness of the house. Lina is the first to observe the folly of thinking that all of them—white landowners, black indentured servants, black female slaves – could really be a family:

Sir and Mistress believed that they could have honest free- thinking lives, Yet without heirs, all their work meant less than a swallow’s nest. Their Drift away from others produced a selfish privacy and they had lost the refuse and the consolation of a clan... As long as sir was alive, it was easy to veil the truth, they were not a family...they were orphans each and all. (57)

Morrison is still grappling with the problem of alienation in her novel. Living and working tighter on Vaark’s farm, the socially diverse characters form precisely a community of the isolated. But these individuals fail to satisfy their yearnings for love, safety and friendship. Consequently, the forging community dissolves tragically. The sense of family ties even though temporary, have been enjoyed beyond the limitations of class, gender and race. If such a family as that in *A Mercy* can survive peacefully then, there is hope for the best of the world. This will lead the hope for the humanity.

Furthermore, the longing of wholeness is one of the pertinent themes in revealing the psyche of the characters. From the very beginning of the novel, it is quite clear that Florens is eager to get love of a black freedman called Blacksmith. She is so desperate that she is ready to do everything for him “I am happy the world is breaking open for us, yet its newness troubles me. To get to you I must leave the only house, the only people I know” (3). After meeting with him, Florens all the time thinks about him, adorns him as Lina calls it as ‘a bleating desire beyond sense without conscience’(58). Separated from her mother and yearning for love, Florens is eager to consume all the love and affection she receives from others. The major factor behind loving Blacksmith is also his freedom as a human being. The whole novel progresses the journey of the protagonist by showing her infatuation to Blacksmith. She frequently turns her narrative towards Blacksmith to reveal the inner feelings of love and attraction—“You are my protection, only you, you can be it because you say you are a freeman from New Amsterdam and always are that” (67). But reading between lines reveals that Blacksmith pays no heed towards her. He thinks her as having the lack of self-reliance. At this time, the desire for wholeness becomes the driving force which enables Florens transgress into womanhood from the stage of adolescent.

As it has been mentioned earlier, over- possessiveness of physical beauty is the most damaging force in one’s life. Sometimes, it goes beyond the extent that it causes the psychic disintegration of the individual pursuit as happens in case of Pecola. This idea of beauty incorporates pain, suffering and agony in her life. Toni Morrison is very well aware of the fact that physical beauty is nothing but the self- destruction of a particular person. This self destruction resulting from beauty appears as the major theme of her debut novel. But later on she replaces the emphasis from physical to psychological capture. Physical appearance remains only the medium that leads one to peep into the psyche by showing a disastrous effect on the individual. For instance, in case of Florens, it is not the color of skin of Blacksmith that fascinates her; rather she finds beauty in his freedom of spirit and mind. This freedom makes Blacksmith to live a happy and peaceful life. Here, the novelist’s purpose is to reveal that the beauty of the world is not physic it is spiritual. That’s why one must pay attention to the inner virtue not to the physical one. Due to this, in her latest novel, the physical appearance does not take any garb which disturbs the psyche of the characters. The shift from physical to psychological intrusion makes one realize the true spirit of the characters.

In true sense of the word, it is the yearning of love and loneliness that affects protagonist's mind the most. Rejected by Blacksmith, the depression does not hover over her spirit; rather she accepts the reality, "See? You are correct. A minha mae too. I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. No ruth, my love. None. Hear me? Slave- free. I last" (159). At this point of time, Florens feels a sense of maturity and womanhood 'the soles of my feet are hard as cypress' (159). It is evident that the change in Florens is psychological with the maturation of her body as well as her mind. This incident recalls Henry James' *The Portrait of a Lady* where the female protagonist Isabel Archer goes one place to another in search of true love, but fails in her attempt. At this juncture, in spite of hurting herself by thinking the hollowness of her life, she develops her psyche in such a way that enables her to face the realities of the world. This maturation or psychological growth seems inevitable to escape from the brutality of the world. The physical led psychological trauma surfaced in *The Bluest Eye*, does not capture the minds of characters – Florens, Rebekka, Lina and others. It reflects the changing perspective of the novelist in case of the real sense of beauty.

While Morrison's earlier works investigate how the trauma of slavery persists in American culture, *A Mercy* reveals its seeds in an orphaned and dispossessed settler. In this new world, class division within the community or outside the community is not visible as the characters from different background live under one roof and have no feelings of hatredness towards one another. There is no gap between white- middle, master-slave and upper-middle class category. The assimilation of different classes brings a sense of belongingness that shapes the boundaries of the new world. Florens even though black and slave, is brought up like a daughter by Jacob and his wife. They neither hate nor disregard the girl as she resembles their daughter Patrician. This parental love makes Florens forget the agony of her abandonment by her mother. She finds the image of parents in them and cares like a daughter. When Rebekka falls ill, she is very anxious about her health and decides to go and bring the Blacksmith who can relieve this problem. Of course, the blurring boundaries of racism and classism enables the characters to emerge themselves from the haunted past and enjoy the present status.

The issue of dominance in *A Mercy* gets a new connotation as it does not impose by the external force; rather it is the individual who let himself to be dominated by others. At one point of time as the novelist states, "To be given dominion over another is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked

thing” (165). However, white supremacy over black is negligible here. The characters like Florens and Sorrow surrender themselves to somebody in order to get love and affection. For example, Florens without sensing her own limitations and boundaries is so much desperate for Blacksmith that she does not even care for her own freedom and personal life. She desires, “I don’t want to be free of you because I am live only with you” (68). The invisible dominance of Blacksmith over her spirit captures one’s attention by stating that black like a white person can be so influential that he attracts one’s mind to any extent. Secondly, the dominance is lessened by showing mercy over the characters. The mercies occur when characters have the power to harm another being but decide not to do for whatever reason. The dominance of some characters over others may misuse the power or have a mercy and spare them. This perspective may be helpful in eradicating the racial self loathing that destructs one’s life such as Pecola Breedlove.

Since 19th century, gender disparity has been the debatable issue in all canons of literary history and Afro-American is no exception. In the male dominated society, women are considered as subordinate to men. Hence, a group of writers becomes conscious and constitutes a female oriented framework in order to present the real significance of women. Consequently, the concept of feminism emerges to connote a way of analyzing the position of women in a society. Later on, this monolithic concept is dissected into different segments as it indicates its increasing intersection with other conceptual frameworks like race, class, sexual orientation etc. On the basis of race, it has been considered that black women are more oppressed in comparison to white women. They struggle for recognition not only from men in their own culture, but also from western feminists because their focus is only to depict the marginalized condition of western females not blacks. In this condition, black women are an invisible group whose existence and needs have been ignored since a long period of time.

During the Liberation movement, black men often disregard for the equality of black women. For instance, Amiri Baraka insists that men and women are unequal by nature. Not only are men and women different in his opinion, but there is no reciprocity in their relationship to each other. Hence a black man is not for his woman as a black woman is for her man. The two do not submit to one another; rather the woman submits to her black man. This way, in an effort to meet the needs of black women who feel they are being racially oppressed in Black Liberation Movement, the Black feminist movement comes into existence in 1970s to encourage black women to liberate themselves from all kinds of oppression. While defining the black feminism,

in *The Black Feminist Thought* (1991) Patricia Hill Collins states, “It includes women who theorize the experiences and ideas shared by ordinary black women that provide a unique angle of vision on self, community and society” (102). Even, in the essay entitled “Double Jeopardy: To be Black and Female”, Frances Beale points out that black woman has been the subject of ‘abject oppression’ because she is in reality the slave of a slave. He considers ‘capital materialism’ as the real enemy which exploits men and women and consequently it should be overthrown. By asserting the equality, Beale states, “If we are talking about building a strong (black) nation, capable of throwing off the yoke of capitalist oppression, then we are talking about the total involvement of every man, woman and child, each with a highly developed political consciousness. Those who are exerting their manhood by telling black women to step back into a domestic, submissive role are assuming a counter- revolutionary position.” (n .pag.)

The need for change and self realization has also been recognized by such writers as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Gloria Naylor etc. By describing the states of black women, Walker regards that black woman is oppressed almost beyond recognition --- oppressed by everyone. She also coins the term ‘womanism’ defining it as a woman who loves other women sexually or nonsexually, appreciates and prefers women’s culture...and women’s strength...committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist...Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender” (10-11). Obviously, womanism is concerned with entire communities, including both the male and the female. Toni Morrison seems to agree with Walker as she also favors the equal participation for both male and female. In the novel *A Mercy*, she depicts the women’s condition in a community where they need men for their security and survival. This transcends the boundaries of race and class. Here, it is evident that female is the subject matter of victimization whether it is in the form of physical harassment or sexual exploitation. Rebekka even though a white, has three options to choose in her life – prostitution, marriage and slavery. Aside from trying to show that slavery is not blind to race, Morrison proposes that females are always at the mercy of men’s decision, whether it be white women like Rebekka or slaves like Lina, and Sorrow. Their lives are not their own ‘we never shape our world’ (69). By realizing their own position after the death of Jacob, Lina thinks the house as if ‘she was entering the world of the damned” (49). At this juncture, the women of the Vaark household achieve a kind of sympathetic unity.

Of course, *A Mercy* is the story of these desperate lives, emphasizing the points of commonality between all four women. Rebekka although white and privileged is sold to her husband at the age of sixteen. Her first experience of adulthood is ‘travelling alone to a foreign country to wed a stranger’ (80). Lina, a victim of small pox is purchased from the Presbyterian through an advertisement which highlights her feature as ‘Hardy female, Christianized and capable in all matters domestic available for exchange of goods or specie’ (50). These incidents show the gloomy picture of women at the time of slavery. This is the world in which women—white, black and Native American are especially vulnerable, literally at the mercy of the men who hold power over them.

Moreover, the eagle story narrated by Lina is an analogous to the depiction of women in man’s society. The eagle represents woman for whom it is difficult to save herself from the brutalization of man, ‘One thing she cannot defend against: the evil thoughts of man’ (60). In the whole novel, female are trying to find a sense of security. It is only for this security Florens is offered by her mother to benevolent Jacob. Minha mae⁴ very well understand that in the plantation culture, women have no protection from men, “To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below” (161). Her daughter’s vulnerability exists simply because she is a woman living in a culture without laws of god and men to protect her. Unfortunately, minha mae has never told Florens about the danger of men or that she herself was raped by a crew of men and therefore does not know which one is Florens’ father. She does not also share her family history prior to D’ Ortega’s plantation forced to flee her burning village, moved four times and sold into slavery. When she arrives in Barbados as a victim of the slave trade, minha mae learns that she is not human but negrita. That one word wipes out all of her heritage and past. By stating the condition of wives at home, Rebekka tells, “Beating wife was common, she knew, but the restrictions not after nine at night, with cause and not anger—were for wives and only wives” (92-93). This posits the physical as well as the sexual exploitation of women in a male dominated society.

Furthermore, in case of three slave girls, the real suffering comes at the time when Jacob dies. For them, Jacob is the savior or the god who rescues them from the brutalization of the society. Rebekka’s illness reminds them about the uncertainty of their lives. These ‘three unmastered women’ (50) realize the truth, “Female and illegal, they would be interlopers, squatters, if they stayed on after Mistress died, subject to purchase, hue, assault, abduction, evil”

(50). The realization reflects the unprotected status of women particularly during the time of slavery. But besides the gloomy picture of female portraiture, Morrison describes the reliability of female in comparison to male. In her view, “In the right environment, women are naturally reliable” (32). The same spirit is justified in case of Florens and Lina.

A Mercy is not a novel depicting slavery in the typical sense of the word, because it explores subtle domains of more psychological involvement. Here, slavery does not inflict corporeal pain, rather it relates to control over one’s psyche. The main emphasis is placed on female characters because she deals with the past through feelings, sensibility, and imagination; things that can be clearly manifested in the female world. Though Morrison is not a hardliner feminist, she only tackles this world of enslavement from an almost female perspective, being a female herself.

Women in the novel are enslaved on many levels. The most apparent kind is the religious enslavement. But before digging any deeper, one should know how Morrison has depicted the concept of religion in her work and how it profoundly affects her characters. Morrison has an almost a pagan perspective of religion. She regards it as an inner faith that has the power to drastically change people’s life and behavior. Along with this, it is shaped by how people conceive it according to their beliefs and social backgrounds. However, these beliefs share something in common: servitude and enslavement. None of the female characters fully apprehend the true meaning of faith. Most of them regard it as a kind of ritual devoid of faith to which they are enslaved. They confine themselves within the limits of a religion that they have been forced to adopt. For example, Lina after taken by a Presbyterian group learns the teachings of Christianity in which she has never truly believed. It is a kind of prison for her because as long as she believes in their Christian god, she has to stay with them. Rebekka Vaark’s wife represents another example of religious confinement. Before being sent to America to marry Vaark, she is raised by her religiously devout parents. Such misguided conception reflects the universal understanding of religion at that time. People are totally enslaved by a number of ill-conceived religious ideas. This kind of enslavement according to Morrison, is not less dangerous than the idea of slavery because while the latter might confine the individual physically and socially, the former confines spiritually. This way religion becomes synonymous with confinement and suppression.

Sometimes, religion does not serve as a relief from miseries, but it becomes the very prison in which individuals suffer all kinds of traumas. It also exposes the notion that the misguided religion can affect people not only psychologically but also socially and physically. On her journey to the blacksmith, Florens gets lost and takes shelter in the house of a woman called Widow Ealing who is totally convinced that her little daughter Jane is possessed by demons. She waits for priests who visit her every now and then to hurt her daughter and see if she bleeds or not because 'demons do not bleed.' (106). Such an attitude from a mother is strikingly tragic and unfathomable, for it shows how deep religious misconceptions and fallacies have run to the extent that they have destroyed the subtlest and noblest human feelings.

Of course, religion moves from being obstructive to being destructive. It could be obstructive when its sole purpose becomes imposing rules and conducting rituals which do not lead to a positive life. It could even get worse and become destructive when it forces a state of fear upon its followers; such is the case of Widow Ealing whose religious fears destroy her maternal love. Besides it, the another way of enslavement by which the female characters suffer is sexuality. This sexuality is used by the novelist in her novels as a way to further delineate the psychology of her female characters and of the society in which they live. Sex is portrayed as a means of social confinement imposed upon women. Each of the female characters has her life affected or changed by male presence. The true picture of the condition of the female has been depicted by the novelist when she states:

Although they had nothing in common with the views of each other, they had everything in common with one thing: the promise and threat of men... Some like Lina, who had experienced both deliverance and destruction at their hands, withdrew. Some like Sorrow... became their play. Some... fought them. Others, the pious, obeyed them. And a few like herself (Rebekka), after a mutually loving relationship, became like children When the man was gone. (67)

Women are regarded as an object of sexual satisfaction by most men and what really makes things worse is that they are compelled to believe so. At that time they have no choice, rather to be under the mercy of a male or to live a life of prostitution and exile. Rebekka has chosen the former whereas Sorrow the latter till she is taken in by Vaark. She becomes both the victims and the outcome of an unjust male-dominated society. Being raped and latter sexually abused has changed her outlook to herself and those who around her. She develops a defensive attitude and regards herself as an incomplete being. Such sexual subjugation becomes inherent, and thus moves from being forced to being sought by women themselves to attain social,

physical and psychological security. Rebekka decides to marry a man she has never seen in her entire life seeking security and self fulfillment. Florens falls in love with a blacksmith and feels sexually and spiritually attachment to him. Here, it seems that her sexual captivation is a result of her lacking love and security as a child. She grows up with the misconception that she should be owned by someone. When she confesses her love to the Blacksmith, she candidly tells him, “You alone own me” (139). It becomes a manifestation of enslavement instead of being one to the love and compassion. Obviously, male dominance becomes the integral part of the female mentality. Women are enslaved not just to men but to their own that they are really inferior.

Apparently, enslavement does not just operate on the surface levels, but it turns to be a part of the female characters’ psychology in the novel. However, they all achieve some kind of freedom when they come to live in the Vaark mansion. But the question is: what kind of freedom is that? A deeper reading reveals that this freedom is not true, and the Vaark’s house turns to be the manifestation of their psychological confinement. Once Vaark dies, this fact materializes that Vaark is not their savior but the rope to which they are all loosely tied. Vaark’s death shows them how frail and invulnerable they are without the male presence. Though, his death is not altogether devastating; it is actually a blessing in disguise. First it creates a shock to all the four female characters, a shock that makes them realize the truth. But it also instigates them to act on their own, shed off enslavement around them and understand the true meaning of freedom.

Rebekka after recovering manages to take control of the house and her husband’s business. Lina inspired by her mistress, feels strong and independent and helps her to run the mansion. Sorrow gives birth to her baby and this makes her feel that she has, for the first time, done something important and totally by herself... she feels whole. As for Florens, she realizes the fallacy of her love to him when he hits her. She as a response attacks him. This act of violence serves as a kind of labor leading to her rebirth as a free and independent women. The four women’s journey from enslavement to freedom has been masterfully and beautifully drawn by Morrison in a way that deeply touches the heart. Florens’ state of mind appears when she describes slaves, “one is a lion in the skin of an ass. The other is an ass in the skin of a lion. That it is the withering inside that enslaves and opens the door for what is wild” (158). These lines indicate her maturity and her self- realization. She finally understands that it is not appearance that matters but heart, and that enslavement begins at heart. If one is free from the inside, she will always remain free.

This freedom of self is echoed in almost all of Morrison's novels. For example in *Beloved*, she reveals how the condition of enslavement in the external world has deep insight in the individual's external world. These internal resonances are so profound that even if one is eventually freed from external bondage, the self will still be trapped in an inner world that prevents a genuine experience of freedom. As Sethe puts it, "Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (95). Besides, the real horror the novel exposes is not physical death but the psychic death. Sethe having run away from the sadistic slave master Schoolteacher is on the verge of being recaptured. Her humanity has been so violated by this man, and by her entire experience as a slave woman that she kills her daughter to save her from a similar fate; she kills to save her from psychic death: "If it hadn't killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her" (200). The same feeling of security stimulates Florens' mother to sacrifice her love. But here the brutalization of slavery is not so much intense as in case of Sethe.

The theme of mother hunger is profound throughout the story. This mother hunger is encoded in the body of orphans as a yearning to be or to have a mother. The word 'mother hunger' first used in *Jazz*, signifies more than to have a mother in *A Mercy*. Here, it examines the limited and improbable forms mother hunger can take in the new world. Even the title itself reflects a man's interference in a mother- daughter relationship though it is the selfless desire of a mother. Of course, motherhood is an empowering role in the fiction, one that brings a sense of purpose and identity. After giving birth to a child, Sorrow's sense of self is dramatically altered by motherhood. She looks into her child eyes and calls herself complete. This sense is a glimmer of hope amongst many dark moments. Despite the representation of an often violent, terribly fraught mother- child experience, Morrison's works demonstrate the crucial importance of Afro-American mothers as both 'ship and safe harbor'⁵ to the survival of their community as a whole. In her view, motherhood is fundamentally and profoundly an act of resistance which is essential for black people's and particularly black women's fight against racism and sexism and their ability to achieve well being for themselves and their culture. While exploring the concept of mothering in the works of Nobel Prize writer, Andrea O' Reilly in his *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart* states:

Morrison demonstrates the importance of this mother work by describing the devastation both personal and cultural that arises when children are not preserved, nurtured, or do not receive cultural bearing. The absences therefore bespeak not a

failure of vision; rather they signify a narrative strategy; one that seeks to stress the crucial importance of mothering by showing the loss and suffering that occurs in its absence. (14)

This absence manifests the desire in the abandoned child to try to receive love from where it can gain. They live at the mercy of others. Florens's desperate love towards Blacksmith indicates her lack of mother affection which leads her to such point where she thinks nothing but only one man that is her body, her soul and everything. But she is bothered when rejected by the same fellow.

Florens is destined to be shaped by mother hunger which perpetrates a self defeating act. At any point of time, she is not able to hear from her mother's own mouth the compulsion that forces the mother to give her in payment of their master's debt. She is never be able to get answers to any of the questions that torment her, for slavery has curtailed the possibility of further conversation between them. She remains ignorant of the fact that the maternal protective instinct has governed her mother's apparent willingness to part with her. It is the hope for the better future that the mother offers Florens. In this context, hope sustains mercy upon the needy and poor fellow. The same instinct of hope has been propelled by the prophet Muhammad by stating the foundation of strong nation, "Hope is a mercy for my nation where not for hope, no mother would ever feed her child, and no gardener would ever plant a tree." (3)

In the 20th century, the perception of motherhood both as a cultural concept and a literary theme has been subjected to considerable changes. Due particularly to psychoanalytical discoveries emphasizing the formative influence of early childhood upon the mental growth and health of the individual, the 19th century notion of motherhood as solely based on devotion, self-sacrifice and restriction to the domestic sphere was further strengthened during the first half of the 20th century. Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* (1977), Marianne Hirsch's *The Mother/Daughter Plot* (1989) reveal how the perception of motherhood, commonly interpreted as a mere cultural reality construct, has been shaped and altered in accordance with the changing needs of a patriarchal society. Since 1960s, it is in particular the black female authors who draw a different picture of maternity as opposed to the prevailing 'white' notions of ideal motherhood. They frequently emphasize the strong emotional attachment of black mothers to their daughters, depicted repeatedly as resulting from shared experiences of oppression.

Toni Morrison is undoubtedly one contemporary black female author who admirably succeeds in creating such a 'penetrating view of black motherhood.' The inevitable difficulties

and enormous obstacles black mothers have been confronted with in the upbringing of their children are certainly a key theme in her novels. For instance, Sethe and Eva are faced with the hardships of life in bringing up their infants, and both choose to kill them for mother love. Killing a child is certainly against morals in the society. However, Morrison creates a mother's image that cannot be easily condemned as evil. At the heart of the novel is the story which reveals the truth of Sethe's infanticide, a story in which the characters and readers keep asking 'what really happened.' In *Sula* also, mother plays an important part in kid's life, shaping how they view different beliefs in the world and setting up values in their child. Every individual's life is shaped by the personal relationships they have with others. The mother and child relationship greatly affects the identity development in the kid. However, Eva is a good mother from the beginning. She always wants the best for her family and most importantly her kids before taking care of herself. But her killing of one of her sons let her children to keep distance from her. In order to gain love once again, she leaves her home for eighteen months. This lacuna severely influences the emotional relationship between Eva and Hannah. Her slow and painful journey back to the house implies Eva's contradictory feelings on killing her child. At one stage Hannah's question to her mother presents her fear of lacking of motherly affection: "Mamma, did you ever love us?" (67). While in *Beloved*, Sethe's story is unspeakable, Eva is unable to see the horror created by herself. But Stamp Paid and Baby Suggs being the fellow Afro- Americans and having suffered the same evilness of slavery, express their complex perspectives on Sethe's violence. If Sethe's self justification of killing for protection suggests a mother's instinctive behavior and motherly love, Stamp Paid's narrative conveys the violent side of Sethe's behavior.

But the motherly image keeps on changing in the fictional world of Morrison. In *A Mercy*, she does not portray any heinous scene committed by mother. She simply presents the motherly image that is ready to sacrifice her own love for the better future of her children. Florens' mother is not anxious about her daughter only, rather she also thinks about her son's rearing. When Jacob agrees to take slave as for debt, he chooses Florens' mother to bring to his farm. At this juncture, she clearly denies by saying that her son might have been suffered for this departure as he is still feeding. But she offers her daughter in the hope to escape her from the brutality of plantation owner. The motherly affection is also surfaced in case of Rebekka. She even after the death of her daughter Patrician, frequently washes her hairs in order to console herself. She sees the picture of her daughter in Florens and thus loves her to the core of the heart.

Lina has also the same motherly feelings towards Florens. She all the time keeps on telling and correcting Florens whenever she does any mistake. She tries her level best to prevent her from the passionate love for Blacksmith because she knows Blacksmith is an arrogant fellow. “She wanted to protect her, keep her away from the corruption so natural to someone like Sorrow, and most recently she was determined to be the wall between Florens and the Blacksmith.” (58)

It is evident that all four female characters portray the mother image by adopting their own children or satisfying themselves in other children. Sorrow who gives birth to a child does not despise it even after the fact that people consider it illegitimate. The sense of mothering is disclosed when Sorrow finds herself complete. “I am your mother. My name is complete” (132). It delineates the fact that childbearing leads mother to the perfection. Obviously, in Morrison’s novels, the motherhood develops in terms of both maternal identity and role. All these incidents show that the empowerment of mothering makes the world better for themselves and their children.

END NOTES

1. The Uncanny according to Freud, involves a repressed emotional impulse that turns into anxiety and can repeat itself. It is the specific mild form of anxiety relating to negative concept that indicates something which cannot be rationally and consciously thought.
2. The word 'cocoon' is used by Clare Marcus in describing the concept of home.
3. Taken from Ezekiel's "Enterprise."
4. Minha Mae is Portuguese word meaning my mother.
5. This term is used for the mothers by Toni Morrison in an interview in essence in 1981, "Black women (need) to pay attention to the ancient properties, which for me means the ability to be the 'ship and the safe harbor.'

WORKS CITED

- Beal, Frances M. "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female." *Sisterhood is Powerful*. revised edition. New York: Random House, 1969.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought*. New York: Routledge, 1991. Web. 21 July 2011.
<<http://books.google.com/books?id/>>
- Freud, Sigmund. "The Uncanny." (Das Unheimliche) 1919. Web. 18 July 2011.
<<http://www.rohan.sdsu.edu/amtower/uncanny.html/> >
- Marcus, Clare Cooper. Quoted in Kathleen R. Arnold. *Homelessness Citizenship, and Identity: The Uncanniness of Late Modernity* (Albany: SUNY, 2004)
<<http://www.books.google.co.in/books?id/>>
- Michele Norris, "Toni Morrison Finds A Mercy in Servitude." Natl. Public Radio. 27 Oct. 2008. Web. 11 July 2011.
<<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyid>>
- Morrison, Toni. "Interview by Susanna Rustin." *The Guardian*. Sat. Nov. 1, 2008. Web. 18 July 2011.
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/nov/01/morrison/>>
- Morrison, Toni. *A Mercy*. London: Vintage Random House, 2009.
- Naipaul, V.S. *A House For Mr Biswas*. New York: Knopf, 1961.
- O' Reilly, Andrea. *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart*. Albany: State U of New York P, 2004.
- Shirazi, Imam Muhammad. *A Mercy to the World*. London: Fountain Books, 2005.
- Walker, Alice. "A Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose" .1983
<<http://science.jrank.org/pages/8159/womanism.html/>>

