

CHAPTER – VI

Morrison in 21st Century: An Ecocritical Study of *A Mercy*

Incorporated in the *New York Times Book Review* list of “10 Best Books of 2008”, *A Mercy* is the ninth novel of Toni Morrison. Since her first novel *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison has been continuously dwelling upon the issues of slavery from different perspectives. *A Mercy* is also one of those novels which fall into Morrison’s lineage of the saga of slavery. However, this novel has a different take on slavery as it unleashes what went under the trauma of slavery and how it started and penetrated into America. By mapping North America as it existed in seventeenth century, Morrison burrows deep into the issues of displacement, migration, exploitation of slaves, indentured servants and even natives as well. It expands the wings of exploitation by showcasing how not only slaves but also the entire America be it landscape, natives, slaves or slave owners all get affected by this wave of colonial exploitation and expansion.

Set up in the area of Maryland, during the decade of 1680, *A Mercy* narrates the story of a sixteen-year old slave girl who works on a plantation in Virginia. This plantation is owned by D’ Ortega who has a very callous attitude towards his slaves. D’Ortega in fact belongs to Angola. He has retained the cruel practices of Angola which he had witnessed and practiced there. Angola was a place inhabited by Portuguese who were notorious for their barbarous treatment and ruthless exploitation of their slaves. As the novel opens, D’Ortega is shown to be in a financial crisis. Jacob Vaark, a trader comes to visit D’Ortega to collect his money of debt. Ortega is not in the capacity to pay off his debt. So, he offers one of his slaves as a partial

payment of that debt. But, Vaark being a morally upright man refuses to do that. Minha Mae is observing this conversation and is quick to make out that Jacob Vaark is a genuine person unlike D'Ortega who carries a cruel animal inside him. Minha Mae thus offers her own daughter Florens as a slave to Vaark and requests him to take Florens along with him. Though Vaark agrees to do so, it leaves a deep imprint on Florens mind who feels ditched as her mother prefers her son to her daughter and deserts Florens.

This visit, however, marks a U-turn in the life of Jacob who is so impressed as well as jealous of the opulence of D'Ortega's mansion that he decides to make one for himself and thus goes on a frenzied spree of minting more and more money which throws him to the grave of slave trade which he earlier despised. Florens is disturbed at her mother's gesture but gets very well with the Vaark's family and servants of the house. Then comes a Blacksmith to create fencing of Vaark's dream house. Florens falls in love with Blacksmith who also heals sorrow and diseases with his magical healing powers. But, Jacob's dream mansion brings a lot of misery for all of them. Though Lina, a native servant warns him of the awaiting destruction, he can't foresee it. After sometime Jacob dies and Rebekka, his wife gets inflicted with small pox. Rebekka then sends Florens to trace blacksmith so that he can cure Rebekka. Florens after many ordeals reaches the place where Blacksmith lives with a boy named Malaik. Blacksmith leaves Florens with Malaik and rushes to cure Rebekka. But Florens doesn't feel comfortable with Malaik. He finds in him the image of her own brother who was preferred to her by her mother. Florens fears that blacksmith will also opt for Malaik and desert her. She goes into a tussle with Malaik and injures him. At that very moment blacksmith enters and deserts her by calling her 'wild'. After

this, Florens gets into a different mental state and starts visiting Jacob's mansion where she writes all her experiences and emotions.

Finally, in the end comes Minha Mae who tells the real reason why she asked Jacob Vaark to take Florens with him. Minha-Mae wanted to give protection to Florens from the cruel and ruthless world of D' Ortega. Thus by creating a web of relationships in the background of slavery, the novelist permeates into the history of colonial invasion and enslavement and its repercussions on individuals and community as a whole. How it all started? Why it started? How it changed? What are its effects? These and many such question(s) relating to the colonial slave trade are answered to in this fabulous work from the pen of Toni Morrison.

A Mercy comes up as a novel which offers itself to myriad interpretations from various angles. Many critics have seen this novel as a novel of racial discourse. In his book review of the present novel, La Vinia Delois Jennings shows how in this novel, by creating the atmosphere of seventeenth century, Morrison has made her modern readers aware of the sectarian America and has completely unfolded the prevalent racial division that permeates all over America. Then, there are critics like Yuan Wang who have studied it as a black feminist discourse. Yuan Wang has shown how black women in *A Mercy* have to face the problem of twin oppressions of race and gender and how these women can regain their lost identity by gushing out their pains and identifying with their past.

Then there are some critics who have observed a close nexus between nature and slavery in Morrison's *A Mercy*. These critics feel that the environment in which the characters portray and perform themselves holds a key to the thematic weaving of the novel and connects the various threads of race, gender, post colonial, motherhood

within its ambience. Joas de Manclos observes how ecology and religion are collaborated in the novel to show how religious background of Europeans is responsible for their invading and brutal practices with which they have tormented the mute slaves for years. He also shows how the natural and the supernatural are mingled to show the ecological preferences of various characters in the novel. We have an interesting article from Rajshree Tridevi in which she introduces the concept of eco consciousness and gives a fresh perspective to study this novel. She elaborates how the extreme climatic conditions and the concept of wilderness both for the slaves and the slave owners determine the mental health of the characters. She even holds the reverse of this true as well. For her in this novel Morrison has tried that the personal mindset of an individual too gets projected on the environment which surrounds him. According to her, all this develops the ecological consciousness of the characters and which in turn determines their actions in relation to nature.

Apart from these views, Manuela Lopez Ramirez breathes a fresh gust of air with her thoughts on 'haunted house', which according to her is used as a metaphor in the novel to delineate and echo the thought processes of women within the novel. The concept of home, claim and haunted carries underneath it various concepts and history of slavery. Equally important are the observations made by Jennifer Terry who has made an ecological study of the novel keeping in mind the hegemonic settler of America and masculine domination of the new landscape created by Europeans. The concept of wilderness is also shown in relation to women characters and how these women characters confront this savageness imposed on them by this wilderness is brilliantly brought out in this essay.

James Braxton Peterson makes a stylistic and narrative study of the novel that how focalization has been used to connect nature and characterization. Moreover,

it shows Morrison's aims to figure out the reasons which perpetuate a particular ideology regarding environment in various characters thereby making the history of slavery interlinked with nature in a complex way. Anissa Wardi's too makes an ecocritical study and describes how individuals place themselves in biotic and human communities. She harps on the issues of environment by keeping the discussion central to the idea of home as propagated by Morrison in her work. All these works by various critics have made an ecological study of the novel keeping one or two perspectives in mind if one has kept home in mind then the other has dwelled upon religion as a molder of environmental ethos. But, so far there is no study which provides an exhaustive study of the novel from an ecocritical angle. Although the novel's size is very small in comparison to other novels of Morrison, yet the novel deals with variegated ecological issues dealing with the history of slavery. Right from the beginning of the slavery till the point of crisis, the novel holds a mirror to the environmental challenges faced by America.

The present study of *A Mercy* thus will be more detailed and fresh as it will trace all the environmental aspects showcased in the novel. Moreover, as the environmental problems had aggravated over the years and Morrison was also no longer the same novelist as she was when she penned her first novel *The Bluest Eye*. *A Mercy* also traces her growth as an ecocritical writer. Another interesting point that comes before readers is that in 2008 she chose a historical set up of 1680s addressing the readers of the 21st century. Did she have a purpose for it or not? This question needs to be answered and can be located if the purpose of the writer can be established after its exhaustive critical study from an environmental perspective through the green lens of an ecocritic. The present study is made keeping all these points and questions in focus.

When a reader first reads this novel, among many themes, the role of nature can be felt clearly by him off and on. Descriptions of nature, characters telling the importance of trees, threats of animals, talks about wilderness and savagery, role of fire and river all highlight that Morrison certainly had ecological relations and factors in her mind when she dipped her pen in ink to kick start this work of great literary caliber.

The prime element that can be made a focal point of ecocritical analysis in the novel is the dynamics of difference in the approaches of characters' attitude towards land. D' Ortega and Jacob Vaark both have different approaches towards land. And, therein lies the factor which distinguishes *A Mercy* from other novels of Morrison because both D' Ortega and Jacob Vaark are not slaves but slaves owners. Both of them came from an outside land and became the colonizers of that land. If one is abhorrent of the wilderness, the other is a lover of it. But, ultimately they are colonizer who lay a claim upon the land of America and change the whole dynamics of that geographical region. Jacob Vaark, however, is not a traditional exploiter of land. He is a lover of Nature. When he has to travel a lot in order to meet D Ortega regarding a debt, he rather than getting irritated enjoy the beauties of nature and express his wonder and amazement at all those sights of nature which enthrall him.

Jacob Vaark is completely enraptured by the beauty of the place which is so new to him. But Morrison puts a line in between the appreciation of this sight of beauty. She writes that Vaark was impressed by the beauty which is "alarming in its rawness and temptation"(10). These three words need an ecocritical focus. The word alarming is symbolic of a warning. Just as Vaark is impressed by its rawness, in the same way European too gets attracted by the savagery of this place which according to the Eurocentric stand must be controlled and converted into a civilized one. This

savagery thus becomes a temptation for the people of the west which tempts them to tap all untouched beauty of America thereby leading them into the mindless obsession of creating a New World for this America. In fact, it seems to be analogous to the creation of New World of Adam and Eve where the temptation of apple became a sin and led to the destruction.

But Jacob is not drawn to this temptation because he is not a greedy land owner who loves a piece of land because of the profits which can be reaped from it. He has known this land for years when he was working for a company. After the Dutch contest, the name of the land lost its existence as the claims went from one hand to the other in the history of America. He is also aware of the dangers which can come during this journey as the landscape of America has been completely distorted after the advent of Europeans in America. With the arrival of Europeans America became a mix bag of blacks, whites, natives, free slaves, indentured servants who all were victims of the white slave owners but by uniting themselves. While all of them could stop the atrocities of slave owners by uniting themselves they turned against each other. This resulted into the formation of new laws which gave the uninhibited right to the whites to slay any black man in the name of the establishment of order. According to Jacob, these “lawless laws” (10) have created an atmosphere of insecurity among blacks. And that’s why while moving over this beautiful landscape which has now become a New America, he is aware of the impending dangers which lie underneath its spectacular beauty.

Jacob still remembers the old beautiful days of this landscape and that’s why while walking along the Lenape trail he “mindful of their fields of maize” (11). In fact by nature, Jacob Vaark is a nature lover. He is even very sympathetic to animals. During his journey, despite severe weather conditions and several other dangers

awaiting, he dismounts himself to save a raccoon whose hind leg is completely smeared in blood as it had got stuck in a tree break. He saves this animal very delicately so that no other harm may be done to the little animal. Another instance which shows his sympathy for animals is the one when he sees a man beating a horse brutally. Though some sailor prevented the horse from beating, he was exasperated at the, "brutal handling of domesticated animals" (26).

But when he reaches D' Ortega's place, he was completely enraptured by the opulence and grandeur of his mansion Jubilio. The source, however, to build such a beautiful mansion is not that beautiful because it is extracted from the exploitation which comes out of slave trade. When Jacob and D' Ortega talks about the debt which D' Ortega has to pay, he tells Jacob that how the third cargo of his ship carrying slaves has died because of the fever which inflicted the ship and he has dumped all the dead bodies near the shore. As a result, he has been fined by the authorities which leads to a double loss to his business. Moreover, he has to pay for disposing off those bodies as well. And thus he is left with no option but to wait for another cargo of slaves. D' Ortega has completely commoditized humans by treating them as commodities to be sold and purchased for the sole motive of profit and when not in use are dumped into sea as useless things. And that's why after his financial loss, D' Ortega has no option but to offer one of his slaves to pay off the debt which he has taken from Jacob. But Jacob denies the offer saying "Flesh was not his commodity" (20). But the gory picture of the slaves with their scars, wounds, branding of slaves on their faces shakes him for a while. Jacob is so repelled by the source of Ortega's trade that he "sneered at wealth dependent on a captured workforce" (26).

Though he hates the wealth accumulated by D' Ortega owing to his slave trade, he cannot stop himself from envying that palatial house. He gets impressed not

only by the grandeur of the house but also by the fact that he was able to face the rich gentry boldly in this house. He realizes that it is only class status which separates both of them. In his secret heart while leaving the palatial house, he harbours a desire to own a big property like this in his own life too. But he promises himself that he will make such a house only by doing hard work in his own business and will not resort to unfair means to hoard property for him. Conscience call in very important and unlike D' Ortega he will make the house "without trading his conscience for coin"(25).

Then he meets Peter Downes, a stranger who teaches him the whole economics of profit and gain. He is discussing about the state of sugar plantations and tells Jacob that it is a profitable business. To this statement, Jacob expresses his amazement and further imagines the difference between slaves in Jublio and here in sugar plantation. But Peter Downes removes all his misgivings as he tells him that even though slaves die early due to exploiting conditions, a fresh stock of slaves replaces them apart from new-born slaves. Thus the business doesn't get affected by all this. However, on hearing his talk about slave business involved in sugar plantations, Jacob still calls it a "degraded business" (29). But Downes explains to him the difference between tobacco farming and business of sugar plantations. On hearing it, Jacob laughs. But at night when he reaches the inn, the mathematics and commerce has entered deep into his psyche and he frames a plan to kick start it in Barbados. Thus Jacob has followed the line of European slave owners who in order to amass more and more wealth and property lay claims of ownership on land and in order to make that claim productive bring a cargo of slaves from Africa who are then exploited on the American soil by white owners. At this point Jacob mentions that he will not be harsh to slaves as he witnessed in Jublio.

Lina, a native girl who has stayed in close communion with nature and appreciated wilderness is quite unimpressed by this gesture of Jacob Vaark. He has already constructed two houses and according to Lina, there is no requirement for constructing a third house. Moreover, Jacob has no children who could be the inheritors of this house. Though mistress Rebekka too dislikes Jacob's idea, she is happy that at least because of this house, he will stay more with her rather than going on his sea journeys. Lina tries to explain Jacob that the construction of this third house "required the death of fifty trees" (41). Lina can also see that when the construction of the house is going on, he is even happier than the birth of his children. But Lina again warns him that killing of trees in such a number is certainly inauspicious and definitely going to bring bad luck to the house. According to Lina, if Jacob has to cut trees, he should seek permission from trees. Otherwise, "his efforts would stir up malfortune" (42).

The prophecy of Lina comes true as Jacob gets ill and dies before the completion of this house. Towards the end of his life, he expresses his desire to enter into the uncompleted house. But as he enters, his breath stops. The misfortune befalls on Jacob who had killed the trees without seeking their permission. The house becomes a haunted place which is haunted by the spirit of Jacob who cannot fulfill his desire of palatial mansion and die without enjoying its beauty. Even Rebekka also falls ill and cannot enter that house and admire it. The house thus becomes useless and haunted.

Through this thought process of Lina, Morrison wants to convey that any kind of land claim or discovery of New World which is created at the cost of killing of trees or any kind of destruction to environment is bound to meet death. Such kind of world can never bring peace and harmony for its inhabitants. People have to realize

that there exists a soul in the trees and nature, and this soul is very crucial for the survival of mankind. Human beings need to develop an ecological consciousness, similar to Lina who being a native is aware and conscious of the importance of this wilderness.

Although Lina, a native is not the only one who exhibits this ecological consciousness, Jacob, an Anglo–Dutch white farmer also expresses his understanding of the land claim and respects the idea that the land doesn't belong to anyone who claims it. Rather the land originally and will always belong to the natives. Here, this idea of ownership is not perpetuated by an Afro–American but a white owner who is sympathetic and loving towards nature as well as blacks. But as Jennifer Terry points out that such a respecting and caring attitude towards nature and slaves exhibits a limited outlook of some whites as displayed in “earlier American leather stocking tales” (134). And this becomes clearly visible as the story unfolds. With the progression of story, reader comes to know that his treatment of love and sympathy is just a temporary state. If Lina's attitude of ecological consciousness is genuine, Jacob Vaark's yearning for a third house and establishment of sugar plantations in Barbados which thrives on slave trade makes his earlier eco-sensitivity a façade. And it is this façade which distorts his relationship both with the nature and the blacks.

Jacob finally becomes one of those insatiable white hungry owners who are crazy to claim any part of land they encounter and exploit it by all means in order to mint money to satisfy their selfish mercenary desires and motives. The prophecy which the village sachem made regarding Europeans that these Europeans who had invaded the land would either flee or die finally went wrong. Even people like Jacob become insatiable scavengers hunting for the land to claim it and exploit it. Through these words, Morrison wants to present a picture of how these Europeans discovered

and explored this American land and became the early settler of America which they named as the New World. This New World for them became a place not to be lived and nurtured. It became for them a site of possibility as this land of wilderness was unoccupied so far and thus being without any historical records offered itself freely to Europeans so that they could lay claim on the land and ransacked it completely which was full of so many natural resources. Initially their idea was only to lay claim and profit. But their thirst grew more and more with the passage of time and they resorted to cruelty and stooped to the level of cannibals in order to attain more money and more ownership. Jacob too follows the same pattern and becomes the king of Barbados. He falls into the lineage of all those Europeans who came there “to chew up the world” (52).

Despite all this, Lina is hopeful that her master and mistress are different from other white owners as they are considerate towards the Mother Earth. According to Lina, both of them know the difference between earth and property. She recalls how unlike their neighbours who are cruel to animals Jacob and Rebekka have fenced their cattle. Moreover, even when it is legally allowed to kill the swine, they are even hesitant to perform this legal task. This gives hope to Lina that Jacob will not become another D’ Ortega who in his mindless hunger of claiming and amassing property will stoop to the level of demons. But when she carries the sick body of Jacob to his uncompleted mansion where he breathes his last, Lina can clearly figure out Jacob’s transformation which leads to his eventual downfall.

In fact, if one closely observes the character and role of Lina, she is not just a traditional side character of the novel who belongs to the native land and impartially offers her perspective in the overall drama happening due to the interaction between the blacks and the whites. Her presence in the novel is like a live wire. Her eco-

sensitivity and regaining of identity shape her character in such a way that she becomes an indispensable part of the novel's narration. In the novel, Lina becomes a character who juxtaposes the ideology of Jacob Vaark. Lina respects the Mother Nature and has a deep communion with her. Her own life gets a serious turn with the advent of Europeans who hurl the natives as savages to be tamed and claimed. She and her family also became victims of the infection which Europeans brought along with them. This disease chewed up almost half of her village population. And when they could not control it, these Europeans burnt down the whole village to contain its spread.

Later, she was sent to the Presbyterians who initially admired her but later on dumped her by calling her savage. She then came to work in the house of Jacob Vaark. But, her inner voice prompts her that whites have done enough damage to her identity by calling her savage. However, she realizes that this same nativity and savagery are her strengths which are not possessed by her white owners. She accepts her nativity and builds her own identity and makes herself bold and independent with the help of her mother's teachings. She converts herself into an altogether different woman for whom wilderness is a strength and savagery a tool to achieve her power.

She reestablishes her affinity with the natural world and developed a harmonious relationship with it. By doing this Lina inadvertently challenges the definitions of savagery and civilization which are thrust upon them by the Europeans who invaded America. Her association with the non-human world comes as a slap to all those who denounce the natives as good for nothing because of their savagery and uncivilized behaviour. Morrison in fact has created two spheres simultaneously for Lina to operate. In one sphere she is denounced as a heathen when she is excluded from the local church rites. The other sphere shows her as a powerful

woman who looks inside her own self and develops her own equations of power with people around her. And it was because of this factor that she is able to negotiate boldly and frankly with the dominant culture without any fear or hesitation. The confidence with which she celebrates her savagery and nativity is clearly exhibited when with her native knowledge she helps Vaark's family to establish a farm of their own. Whites consider only themselves to have the capacity to claim and dominate the land. But these Europeans cannot convert this dominant land into productive land without the help of natives. Natives are aware of the geographical, natural and social conditions of America. So, their knowledge even if these whites call it savage is like a panacea for them to extract something productive of this land. No doubt, America is a hub of natural resources which hides under its wilderness. But, only blacks and natives have access to this wilderness through their savagery.

The helplessness of whites becomes the strength of natives who were earlier proclaimed as savages. Though Lina doesn't possess a thorough knowledge of farming, whatever little she knows, she converts that very native knowledge into a powerful weapon which helped her in asserting her real self among the whites. Thus through the character of Lina, Morrison outrightly rejects the idea of vanishing natives who are losing their identity after working under the dominant ideology of Europeans. Not only this, she has got so much power for herself that she doesn't stay under the false assumption that all dominant whites are threats for natives and blacks. She blatantly refuses all such categorization, because if all dominant whites are threats, she must not be living in harmony with Vaark's family. Rebekka has become a friend of Lina and confides in her. Lina is also faithful towards her as she sleeps on the floor besides Rebekka. She takes care of her from Sorrow so that she may not hurt Rebekka. She thus refuses to put all the whites into one category of dominant and

cruel whites. According to her, if one white will set ablaze your houses, you will also find those whites who will help you and take care of you.

The story of Lina with all her expressions and reflections in the novel inclines itself towards an ecocritical perspective and dissection of the American colonial environment created by the Europeans. Even the story of eagle which Lina narrates to Florens is a perfect reflection of how the deliberations of dominance and ownership have moulded Lina's psyche that the concepts of slavery and colonization even enters the stories which elders share with children. Lina tells Florens that once there was an eagle who had laid her eggs in a nest. She had made the nest in such a way that snakes and other animals couldn't hunt them. She always kept a vigil on all her surroundings. A slight movement of a plant or animal would welcome a frown of the animal. She took utmost care of her eggs and was always ready with her weapons of beak and talons which nature had gifted her. But according to Lina, there was only one attack against which she could offer no defense. And that assault comprises of "the evil thoughts of man" (60). Lina then tells Florens that when everything was going on peacefully, a traveller came to that land. He climbed to the peak of mountain and surveys the entire beauty of the landscape. He was so much captivated by the beauty of the land that he couldn't stop himself from admiring it and said to himself "this is perfect – this is mine" (60). As he uttered this line standing from the peak of a mountain, the whole valley was full of echoes of these words.

The power and strength of the echo were so huge that all the flora and fauna of the place got shocked by this statement. Animals also came out of their caves to comprehend the meaning of this single word. Not only this, the power and threat of these words was so magnanimous that the eggs of eagle began to quiver and ultimately cracked. The eagle on seeing the state of her eggs could not contain her

anger and looked for the source of this sound which she hadn't heard till now. Finally, the eagle traced the source of that sound and spotted a traveller. On seeing the traveller, she decided to take revenge upon this intruder and launched an attack on him with her claws. But the man raised his stick and struck the eagle with all his power. And ultimately the eagle fell down. When on hearing this story Florens interrupted her by asking the whereabouts of eagle, then Lina answered that they are still falling. Florens then again puts forth a question regarding the eggs. To this Lina gives quite an enigmatic reply. She answered "we have"? (61). This "we" (61) coming from Lina is as enigmatic and interesting from the point of view of narration and thematic construct of the novel.

Now, if observed deeply and symbolically, the eagle and traveller story is analogous to the story of nature versus the conquest of the New World by Europeans. The eagle is none other than Mother Nature who is taking care of her children. The nest of eagle represents the land of America which is blooming with its beauty of wilderness and inhabits various kinds of flora and fauna in its lap. But the serenity of this place gets disturbed by the intrusion of a traveller which stands for the European white masters who too came to this land as a traveller. But he was so enraptured by the beauty of this place that his European values of greed and dominion forced him to claim this land as "mine" (60). And it was just the greed to calling everything mine which took the Europeans into crazy and ruthless journey of exploiting the Mother Nature of America. And thus when Florens enquires about the situation of mother eagle, Lina just tells her that mother eagle who represents the natural habitat of America is ever falling since the Europeans made their first entry into this wilderness and finally converted into a New World which is full of scars of colonization and

exploitation. Jennifer Terry too puts a similar argument. According to her, the story of eagle and nest, “works as an allegory of New World conquest and ownership” (136).

The repetition of the word “Mine” (60) points out how the white colonizers were bent upon claiming this far off land as their own of which they are not original inhabitants. Though they came with a promise to turn this uncivilized land into a civilized one, they broke the eggs of the eagle. However the story also carries with it a note of hope. When Florens towards the end of narration enquires about the state of eagles eggs; to this Lina replied that though the baby eagles were separated from their source of nourishment, those baby eagles survived. All these baby eagles, i.e. natives and blacks have faced the horrors of exploitation by whites at the time of slavery. Despite all this, they have survived and created their own identity by retaining the values of their own culture and traditions. Lina becomes a survivor and her character becomes significant as a site of ecological study as she epitomizes the success stories of those survivors who keep intact their ecological consciousness and emerged victorious in the power game of natural habitat of America and the colonial invasion of Europeans. *A Mercy* completely erases the variegated accounts of America which have been put forth by Europeans in a dominant way. Rather, the novel makes us aware that a single notion can’t suffice in the description of America. And if one will do that than he will be oblivious of several determining factors of expansion which described the true state of America.

Apart from this, the concepts of ‘wild’ and wilderness’ hold a lot of importance in the novel which calls for an eco-critical evaluation. Florens’s narrative, right from the beginning till the end of the novel delineates this concept of ‘wild’ and ‘wilderness’. But, Morrison doesn’t merely use her for showcasing this aspect. In fact, she dexterously makes use of Floren’s narrative to juxtapose two different rather

antagonistic concepts of 'wilderness' which are harboured respectively by blacks and whites and thereby challenges the definition of wilderness and wild thrust upon the blacks and natives by the whites. Not only this, Florens's voice in the novel also represents these notions as masculine which equates both nature and women and place them on the same pedestal of being 'wild'. Another thing which garners our eyeballs is that though Florens's has to face hurt, sadness and desertion towards the end, all this melancholy hides in it a powerful force to assert herself. Not just herself, she even goes to the extent of asserting her identity of being an American. She initiates a fight with the white dominator male who becomes the ruler of this New World and claims to define the concept of 'wild' and 'wilderness' as it suits him.

Florens is a young black slave girl who works in the sugar plantations of D' Ortega with her mother Minha Mae and her little brother. When Jacob Vaark pays visit to D' Ortega place, Minha Mae offers her own daughter as a partial payment of D' Ortega debt. Since then Florens works in the house of Jacob where he lives with his wife Rebekka, two girls Lina and Sorrow and two indentured servants William and Scully. Everything is going on peacefully. Then comes the entry of Blacksmith who comes to fence dream mansion of Jacob. Florens gets physically infatuated to Blacksmith and a romance bloomed between the two. Lina who is worldly wise can see a connection between them right from day one. Not only this, Lina's anxiety increases when she comes to know that Blacksmith is a free man. She even warns Florens of the destruction that such a union can cause. Lina tried her best to caution her by saying "You are one leaf on his tree" (59). But Florens is not ready to hear Lina and abruptly retaliates by saying, "No I am his tree" (59). But, Blacksmith a free male who is representative of colonial designs changes everything for Florens which

ultimately brings catastrophe in her life. Lina's projection of Florens's state clearly heralds the awaiting destruction.

Then comes the death of Jacob followed by the illness of Rebekka in the story. Rebekka thinks that Florens will be the right person who should be sent to bring back Blacksmith who has earlier cured Sorrow with his magical healing powers. Florens too seizes this golden opportunity thinking that it can be a way to reunite her with Blacksmith. Though she is initially very scared as she has to go into a completely unknown land, she embarks upon the journey to meet her love. In fact, being a female and a slave both creates a sense of fear in Florens' mind. That's why, Rebekka gives her a letter describing the motive of her journey and approving her belongingness to Jacob's family as slave. She thus becomes a documented slave which will give her protection during her journey. The initial threats come from the natural world as she walks among chestnut trees. She is initially happy to witness this natural beauty but the cutting of trees on mass scale has made the ground sloppy with snow which makes it difficult to walk. Then she feels the presence of an unidentified creature which scared her. The forest and the terrain become horrible and arduous for Florens. She tries to face the situation bravely by keeping her nerves calm down.

The point here to be noted is that though forest poses a threat for Florens but she uses the same nature i.e. trees to escape from the threat induced by the sound of an animal. Only after night that she is able to locate a hollow wood to lie on. But that log of wood is also full of ants. She thus break twigs and branches and makes a bed out of them by piling them so that she lies down comfortable. Florens is here shown by Morrison adapting herself to the rough landscape of the America. And it is this adaptability and self dependence which will make her a torch bearer who will challenge the domination of males as well as whites.

In fact, these impending dangers are earlier hinted to Florens. She is very well aware of the dangers posed by this wilderness. When she imagines herself walking through the beech and white pine trees in order to meet Blacksmith, she in her imagination asks Blacksmith whether this wilderness will harm her or help her. Though throughout the journey, she is happy and eager to meet Blacksmith, the fear of wilderness accompanies this excitement. And it is this feeling of excitement and love which make her cross this difficult landscape despite so many hurdles. The interesting thing, however, which emerges from this episode is that by coming face to face with the wilderness and getting wild all through her journey after facing challenges from the natural world, she comes to understand her own definition and explanation of freedom. Florens has been a slave girl till now. She hasn't ever felt this emotion of liberty. Never ever she had harboured this notion of freedom. Thus when she encounters the American landscape, her ideas of wilderness and freedom gets interlinked and, she comes up with her own definition of freedom which is clearly associated with her experiences of the natural world. She is not even sure that whether her explanation of freedom is correct or not. So she questions, "I am a little scared of this looseness is that how free feels? (67)

Thus the nature and wilderness offers her a power to choose and she equates this availability of choice to freedom. Moreover, she equates freedom with nature itself because everything in nature is free to display its beauty in full grandeur without any inhibitions. But, here also racial discourses play their role and shape her understanding of freedom. Rather than calling this feeling of euphoria as freedom she terms it as 'looseness' because being a slave girl any kind of liberty taken by a slave from the set rules and regulations is termed as looseness on their part. So, for Florens looseness is the nearest synonym of freedom that she is aware of being a slave girl.

And it is only her slave status that makes her still feel fearful of the freedom. Morrison shows how the dominant discourses of American history shaped and limited the identity of slaves that they couldn't even give them access to the true definition of liberty. Penetration of dominance is so deep that even if someone like Florens got to feel the true emotion of liberty, he felt perplexed to define this feeling in its true terms. Florens thus sees wilderness in all its horrors and beauties.

In the novel, Morrison shows the encounter of two different characters with wilderness. One is Jacob, a white who is impressed by the beauty of wilderness and decided to claim and exploit it. On the other hand, one sees Florens whose encounters with wilderness are not that rosy. She has to face many hurdles. And at last, she is equated to the wilderness. Moreover, the damage done to her identity comes out of her encounters with the human world. Though the non-human world poses some threats, the actual damage is done to her by the human beings like her. During her journey to Blacksmith's place, when Florens feels threatened by the animals, she looks for a house to take shelter in. And finally she takes the shelter in the house of Widow Ealing who is staying there with her daughter Jane. Next morning, when some members of quaker community come to visit Ealing's place, she witnesses an event of utter dehumanization where she is treated so in such an inhuman way that she is labeled as 'wild'.

The racial exploitation is at its peak when these people see her. When the villagers see a black girl, they are quite hostile towards this young girl. The disgusting and dehumanizing behaviour which the villagers exhibit because of their racial biasness shocks the readers as well as Florens to a great extent. Morrison clearly captures the emotional confrontation which happens between the villagers and Florens when they first see her. Florens tells that all visitors stare at her badly as if she is a

strange creature. Women are scared of her and invoke God to help them. A little girl gets too terrified on seeing her that she starts crying loud.

Florens can immediately make out that, she despite being a human being is not one among themselves. She has a separate identity other than being a human being which her blackness brings to her personality. And expecting some harm which she can get because of her blackness, she immediately produces the letter which proves her to be a slave of a white family. Thus her identity is not Florens. It gets defined by virtue of being a slave to a white family. The villagers don't even accept her status as a documented slave. And in order to protect themselves from the threat of her blackness, they ask her to uncover herself so that they can inspect her. Equating Florens with swine, they give her one of the most horrible and traumatic experiences of her life.

Addressing her as swine they inspected her teeth, tongues, eyes, palm, arms, legs and what not. The idea of racial differences which leads to the naked examination of a young black girl highlights how these differences have completely severed any kind of emotional or intellectual ties with other human beings. Florens feels as if she is an animal who is displayed in an auction for the customers. The moment where she is equated to animals is an entry into the world of wildness which will be later on thrust upon her identity of being a black by the dominant white group. Nevertheless, Florens stays as a slave at D' Ortega's plantations and later with Jacob Vaark. Till now she hasn't faced the burns of this fire of racial hierarchy which injures a human being deep down his heart. The horrible memories of this encounter with the Quaker community keep haunting her for a long time. It is for the first time that her position in this world is equivalent to animals who are termed as wild in this human world. Her non-human status in the racial hierarchy of human beings is an eye

opener for her and jolts her so deeply that it sows the seeds of wildness in her. The effect is so deep that she wishes that in her future journey towards Blacksmith's place, no one should stare at her and observe the wildness in her which has been implanted by those villagers. So when Daughter Jane bids her good bye, she wishes that she may not encounter, "eyes that examine me for a tail, an extra teat"(113)

Florens feels scared of the eyes watching her and scrutinizing her by implanting all sorts of animalistic characteristics inside her body. Her human identity is lost somewhere. Florens realization comes fast that villagers cannot and will not categorize her in their category. Their failure to consider her even a human being is poignantly conveyed by Florens when she says, "I think they have shock that I can talk" (119). Florens thus starts losing her identity. She oscillates between her human and non-human status shown to her by the villagers. Florens who has earlier experienced the feeling of nature and thereby has developed a sense of identity during her first half of the journey is now torn into pieces. That freedom and identity is all in vain for her. She is now scattered. The identity and self-pioneering status which she has gained is disintegrated and distorted by ideas of darkness and wild implanted in her by the dominant class.

The dehumanizing narrative of the wild and wilderness shown to her has taken away even the slightest notion of freedom which she had earlier gathered during her communion with nature and wilderness. The superficial darkness of black colour is always there with her heart. What had till now been a biological inheritance displayed outside has now become a darkness which snatches away even the right of being called a human and instead planted a darkness of identity which relates her with wild. This also becomes an assertion of her own statement at the very start of the novel when she quotes her mother, "I am dangerous, she says, and wild" (2). The novel also

demonstrates how this wildness is associated with the sexuality of a female. A female body is considered as wild and thus can be hunted down. Even Blacksmith highlights this wildness in her which needs to be controlled as she is a slave. He says, “your head is empty and your body is wild.” (135).

The wildness of Floren’s body is highlighted many a times by herself as well as characters around her. Florens liked to wear Mistress’s shoes which according to her mother highlighted the wild sexuality of a woman. Her association with Blacksmith is also a wild assertion of this physical sexuality. Her sexual desire is thus seen as “appetite” (p.58) by Lina. Woman’s body becomes a site of wilderness which carries an inherent wildness in it which needs to be explored, claimed and maimed by others. Florens thus turns into a “she wolf” (p 151) who has embarked a journey to hunt her lover.

But, when she meets Blacksmith, the claim of wildness comes full circle and becomes an essential part of her personality. When Florens reaches Blacksmith’s place she informs him about Rebekka’s health. Blacksmith immediately leaves the place to see Rebekka. He doesn’t take Florens with her in order to take care of Malaik who is an orphan child is being taken care of by Blacksmith. Florens, however, feels insecure because of Malaik as she sees in him the image of her own little brother. And she fears that just as Minha Mae chooses her son over her daughter, in the same way Blacksmith will also opt for Malaik if given a choice. She inadvertently gets into a violent tussel with Malaik and injures him in the process. At that very moment Blacksmith enters and reprimanded her for this act. In his fury of anger, he says something to Florens which completely changes her life. Florens lack of control when she injures Malaik is termed by Blacksmith as an act of wildness.

Though Blacksmith is justified in his anger, the kind of vocabulary he uses for the black African girl once again put her into the category of non-human world comprising animals. Just as wild animals need to be controlled, in the same way Florens who has exhibited lack of control and shown wild side in her behaviour with Malaik needs to be tamed. This kind of analysis put forth by Blacksmith once again identifies Florens, a black slave with nature. Similar to Florens, nature is without any boundaries and is dangerous. Thus both demand the restraint of a dominant man. Moreover, when Florens tries to give an explanation of her action, he is not even ready to hear her. He pays no heed to her explanations. He thus exhibits a patriarchal mindset where a woman is unnecessarily trampled down by a male. When she asks him why he is brutal to her, he answers that her status of being a slave is responsible for that. For him she can't carry with herself the ideas of liberty as her mind is empty like a wild creature.

According to Morrison, this title of 'wild' is thrust upon a black woman by males and non whites. It is not inherent rather constructed. Thus the two episodes of her life, one with Quaker community, and the other one with Blacksmith devoid her of her humanity. As Florens says towards the end, "I am lost." (138). With her initial interaction with wilderness, Florens gets to comprehend the meaning of freedom for the first time. But, like a bird when she is ready to lift her feather to fly in a free world, her wings are clipped by racial eyes of Quaker community and sexual domination of a free man. But, Florens is a character which is created by Morrison who will not accept these thrust definitions. She violently gives answer to all this rather than being a meek sufferer. She accepts her wildness as her strength and challenges Blacksmith to have a face-off with this wild streak in her if he can, "you say I, am wilderness. I am." (155).

Thus towards the end, she creates a definition of her own which is opposite to the dialogue narrated to her by Blacksmith. With a revengeful streak, she is ready to take on both the Blacksmith and the dominant world. She makes her wildness her strength. She recalls how Blacksmith explained to her that enslavement was that state when there was something inside you which withered and left a kind of savageness and wildness in that person. But she mocks at this definition of freedom and wildness. She mocks at it by offering a distinction between the slaves and free men. She says, “One is a lion in the skin of an ass. The other is an ass in the skin of a lion” (158). The line underlies a lot of satire and humour beneath it. In these lines, Florens clearly says that with this wildness inside them, slaves are the real lions in this game of freedom even though their blackness makes them look like an ass. On the other hand, these so called free men are only free on papers. The wild streak which is missing in them makes them in reality an ass. It is only papers, i.e. their superficial existence which gives them the tag of a lion. The statement thus comes as an acceptance and celebration of that wildness which resides in Florens. She also accepts how she withered inside and became wild. She accepts it and celebrates that day when she had got withered for the first time in the house of Widow Ealing. She further confesses how this wildness opens the claws of this black bird which shows her free soul to Blacksmith.

But Florens is aware that she is exploited not only because she is a black and slave but also because of the wildness in her. Rather, one significant reason for this exploitation is her gender. She thus gives a shock to the readers when she makes an assault on the masculinistic notions of wilderness by offering a distinction between he-lion and she-lion. Florens says, “still there is another thing. A she-lion who thinks his mane is all. A she-lion who does not.” (158) Through the words of Florens,

Morrison questions the masculine pride of males like Blacksmith who think their manhood makes them the real lion of this world based on hierarchies. Florens doesn't stop only here. She goes on to contrast Daughter Jane with Blacksmith. According to Florens, Daughter Jane is the real hero as despite being a woman and sufferer, she risks her own life to save the life of another woman who has been thrown out of the human world because of her wildness by the likes of Blacksmith who claim to be superior only because they are males and whites.

Despite being subjugated and thrown out of the human order by virtue of her race and gender, Florens finally emerges victorious and is able to reclaim her wilderness by holding it as a powerful weapon in her hands. Her wilderness has made her so powerful that she is ready to write down her own story. Florens' personality now blooms in self-belief and self-confidence and by penning her own story, she in fact wants to give a perfect shape to her own identity with which she is able to confront the American world dominated by males and whites. And she is happy that she is travelling this path all alone without the support of any white like Jacob or the support of a free male like Blacksmith. Though she is aware that her journey is going to be tough, her confidence assures her that she will definitely find her path in this untrodden territory. But now with these lessons of hardships and wilderness all these hurdles don't matter to her because now she has grown up into an independent and self-reliant girl for whom her "way is clear..." (155) Florens thus emerged as a survivor of this dominating American world ruled by whites and males. Rather than submitting to their exploitation, she accepted her wilderness and carved out her own identity. She asserts her identity completely when she finally recognizes herself with her own name. She says, "I am also Florens...Free. I last" (159).

In fact, her writings in the house of Jacob are also a way to assert her identity and pioneering self. The point here to be noted is that she chooses only the empty house of Jacob Vaark which was fenced by Blacksmith to rewrite and assert her identity history. She could have chosen any other place. But, she deliberately picks this empty house because by writing her own story, she wants to assert her free pioneering self to the whites who are represented by Jacob Vaark and to all the free males who are represented by Blacksmith. Her words are thus not merely a collaboration of alphabets. Rather these words symbolize a black slave girl's inner strength and courage which she has mustered after her encounter with wilderness. With the power of these words, she wants to challenge and crush all those notions of the white dominant world of America which is predominated by males. Florens describes the power of these words by saying, "These careful words... will talk to themselves. Need to fly up then fall... and flavor the soil of the earth." (159)

Not only this, Florens also gives reason why she chooses only the medium of 'words' to propagate her voice. According to Florens, words carry a lot of power. She feels that her story should reach to all the blacks all over the America because once these words reach to them these words will talk themselves. After this, all the blacks who are exploited by whites owing to their savageness will once again start celebrating their wilderness. And that will certainly be a true moment of liberty for all of them.

The character of Florens thus becomes significant from ecocritical perspective as her concepts of wild and wilderness constitute the main ethos of the novel which are clearly displayed by Morrison who has always given importance to environmental issues in her works. In *A Mercy*, Morrison has shown the seventeenth century world of America which was ready to be tamed completely by the Europeans. Jacob Vaark's

and D' Ortega are representative of all those Europeans who were enraptured by the American landscape and fantasized how these natural resources could be exploited and made more productive for their own benefits. But there is one essential difference between these two Europeans. If one sees the landscape only as a money minting ground, the other is appreciating and caring towards the Nature initially. Jacob has a complex attitude towards Nature. And perhaps it is this complexity which leads to his demise in the novel even before his dream house gets completed. Lina is another important character in the novel that represents the natives, i.e. the original settlers of America. These natives who are represented by Lina have an initial reverence and love towards nature. But with the wave of colonization, they accept their fate and adapt themselves to the changing landscape of New America. They neither become sufferers nor challengers. They only emerge as adapters of the changing landscape. Florens who lies at the heart and centre of the story is emblematic of all these black slaves who are considered savages because of their blackness. Not only this they are even equated to animals and wilderness. But Florens makes this wilderness her strength and rewrites her history over the hollowness of white dominated world. The character of Florens is a step ahead of all other black characters developed by Morrison.

Moreover, environmental concerns have always been a part of Morrison's works. In her previous novels, Morrison has shown how due to colonial domination, human beings who belonged to black community were collaborated with nature. And this was used as a reason to make them feel sidelined. They were even exploited and are even considered non-humans because of this. But *A Mercy* does not restrict itself merely to the depiction of this chaos. In this novel, Morrison criticizes, uncovers and challenges this colonial set up. Terry rightly says, "The joining of a colonizing

dynamic with ideas of nature is encapsulated by the processes of othering, dehumanizing, and rendering wild which *A Mercy* uncovers and challenges” (145).

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