

## **Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*: A Novel of the History of Feminist Slavery and the Land**

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### **Abstract:**

Toni Morrison, an eminent Afro-American novelist, boasts a remarkable literary legacy. With numerous novels to her credit, many of which have transcended linguistic boundaries, she has consistently explored the experiences and struggles of the black American community within the context of racial discrimination. This paper presents an analysis of the portrayal of slavery in her novel *A Mercy* in the light of Racism and underscores Morrison's propensity to draw insights from America's historical past that reflects the contemporary reality. Of paramount significance is the inextricable link between history and the persistent issue of racial discrimination against black Americans. The novel eloquently conveys the tragic consequences of the historical slave trade in America, illustrating the enduring impact of this dark side. The paper also unveils the profound spiritual and physical alienation experienced by individuals subjected to prolonged rights deprivation, treated as mere commodities for sale, and subjected to the brutal cruelty of slave traders in America. Furthermore, the exploration of motherhood and its profound significance within the narrative adds a layer of complexity to the state of women in America.

Keywords: (Salves, masters, racism, history, America, motherhood, women).

### **Introduction**

#### **Slavery in America**

“Slavery typically involves compulsory work with the slave's location of work and residence dictated by the party that holds them in bondage.”(Slavery 2024) Slavery is a merciless and unethical condition for one person to own another person as ownership and deprive him of his rights as a human being “Slavery is the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised.”(Allain, 2012). Slavery has been present throughout the world in roughly every

civilization since the start of mankind. To be sure, the guilt of enslavement is not confined to America. However, it is simple to retell America's history. The beginning of enslavement started in 1619, in Virginia, Jamestown, Nevertheless, slavery has been present in the United States. Slavery began with the enslaving of indigenous commune with the incoming of European colonists. Columbus and Spanish conquistadors in 1492 enslaved indigenous peoples of the Caribbean. European colonists such as the French, Dutch, British, Spanish, and the domestic were enslaved by Russian in places such as Alaska and New England, California, the Southwest, the Southeast, and the Caribbean.

However, when Thomas Jefferson wrote, "All men are created equal" (1776), the country enslaved half a million people. With the view to make a society that actually conforms to the doctrine all people are created even, we need to face the real frame of history. The affirmative along besides the negatives, the good besides the hateful, and all things in between. It is impossible to change one's future into come to code with the past. Thus, to understand America's story, teaching the truth of servitude is not only significant, it will also make us to form a fair society for future generations.

So many goals are there behind the enslavement of other people. Nonetheless, the intent of subjugating another man and continuing this habit for a long time was to earn wealth and make a hierarchical system that kept white landholders in power. As such, slaves have no human rights. Whites can buy, sell or bequeath slaves without the possibility of freedom. They beat slaves, torture them and their enslaver will face no punishment. Enslavers tear families apart by selling children, mothers, and fathers to several enslavers and never seeing each other again. The United States of American colonies established laws protecting, establishing, and continuing the work of slavery more than 250 years. They established rules to ensure that slavery found on race. Thus, the organization of bondage is firm in the fake and racist concept of white superiority. It was a way to deny people's rights because of race and ensure that white western men kept in the higher status of authority. The records of these hateful and pseudo tenets of white

supremacy and the oppression they have caused continues its negative impact our society today.

Another factor that encouraged slavery, as it is clear is the economic factors. Enslavers forced People to labour in a various jobs. They were doing hard work rising cotton, sugar, tobacco, growing and harvesting crops. They also work in factories, shops and homes. All enslaves, without attention to tasks they do, strive from sunrise to sunset or longer and without pay. Masters supervise them and might torture them if the master did not satisfied with the work. Whipping, beatings and marking not only caused physical mutilation, but also suffered psychological and spiritual injuries as they dehumanize the enslaves.

Whereas enslavement was further rooted in the South of America because of its agricultural economy, it existed in each settlement and both the North and south profited monetary from the slave trade “Nonetheless, by the time of the Revolution, slavery was entrenched throughout the Chesapeake and the Virginia Piedmont, a legacy of great importance for the subsequent century.”(Wright, 2020). They were massive engines of economic development in the settlements. Earning wealth out of slavery was not just the work of owners of southern plantation. In addition, the northern bankers monopolized in farming land. The northern procurement companies and the cotton texture mills that ignited the manufacturing revolution in the north using the southern cotton, trade and shipping. The whole industries and the fortune they amassed closely related to the viciousness of enslavement. Alongside the crops, purchasing, marketing, and inheriting slaves was a great side of the South's economy.

Due to the spread of exploitation, enslaved people began to revolt against their masters. This seems to be a dominant state throughout the history of mankind. In the history of slavery, there have been those who oppose it, supposing this to be improper and oppressive. Enslaved people detested slavery, strived for their liberty, and fought slavery in

diverse manners. There were armed insurgency like those by Nat Turner, or escape via subway, in addition to few defiant activities, such as executing something mistakes or destroying machines. People may defy slavery and secretly adoration in churches or learning. During the slavery term, Afro-Americans carried on to preserve the African cultural heritage while inspiring new ones. Creating families, shaping art, cookery, and music to reveal their distress and visions, and relying on beliefs, were all courses to preserve personality and resist their non-human conditions of slavery. Art and music like spirituality, gospel, jazz and blues evolved from African slave music. None can deny the participations of black Americans to shared American culture and history. Other shapes of opposition to slavery originated from abolitionists, from whites and blacks, who refused slavery, spoke out against it, and struggled to make it out of law.

Another key factor in the success of the movement was the role of Africans who were or had been enslaved. There can be no doubt that, through rebellions, personal acts of resistance and as anti-slavery campaigners in their own right, Africans were absolutely pivotal to the development of the abolitionist movement as well as bringing an end to the Transatlantic Slave Trade itself.

(Kaye, 2005)

After the America independence, Slavery was firstly prohibited in Vermont in 1777, Followed by many northern state. Soon after Quakers showed their disbeliefs in slavery. In 1775, Pennsylvania Quakers founded the first anti-slavery society in Philadelphia. Some people, such as Thomas Jefferson, vigorously took part in this practice whilst disapproving it simultaneously. Jefferson, who was the author of the Declaration of Independence, the establishing father, and enslaver who enslaved hundreds of Africans in his leif, wrote of the institution: “But, as it is, we have the wolf by the ear, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. Justice is in one scale and self-preservation in the other” (Jefferson, 1820). This fact that justice was not in line with the maintenance of the existing system led to the civil war.



In 1860, America enslaved more than four million slaves who constituted one-third of the Southern people. To cancel or preserve slavery start Disagreements that became extremely powerful that 11 states broke away from America to organize a new country, the Confederate, leading to the Civil War. Fight between North and South, lasted to 1865. The Constitution of the Confederacy and each secession document of the secessionist states determined that the continued practice of slavery was the main cause of secession.

The main cause of the Civil War (1861-1865) was the serious disagreement between different socio-economic systems that existed in one state — the bourgeois north and the slave-owning south. In 1860, Republican Abraham Lincoln became the president of the United States. His victory for the slaveholders of the south was a signal of danger and led to secession - the withdrawal of the southern states from the Union. South Carolina was the first to leave the United States at the end of December 1860, followed by the Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Texas in January 1861, and Virginia, Arkansas, Tennessee, North Carolina in April-May. These 11 states formed the Confederate States of America (Confederation), adopted their constitution and elected the former Mississippi senator Jefferson Davis as their president.

(Aleksandrovna. Andreevna, 2018)

With the end of the Civil War, and the victory of the Union, the Americans passed the Thirteenth Amendment in 1865. This modulation to the American Constitution formally banned the official establishment of slavery. Regardless of this victory, the already enslavers met plentiful barriers. Constant racism, terrorism versus black groups, and economic and political disparity resulted in the civil rights movement in the sixties later. America continues struggling with the traditions of slavery and persists to face the defiances of distinction. The struggle remains to defeat past and present grievances.

## ***A Mercy: History and Excavations in the Idea of Slavery***

Ultimately, the characters in *A Mercy* find themselves bound to a shared destiny, although their individual futures diverge regardless of the circumstances that brought them together - be it love, hatred, or the desire to escape. In this narrative, courage alone proves insufficient. The setting, whether loved or despised, becomes a mixed blessing and curse for those who inhabit it. It serves as a dual reflection of the deceptive nature of reality. The language used in describing the place adds a sense of mystification, presenting it as a paradoxical blend of beauty, fear, and perpetual horror. Even the gate of Paradise embodies both mercy and curse. This portrayal seems to mirror America's history, where the scent of the land mingles with the odors of dust, decay, death, disease, and unfulfilled desires. *A Mercy* suggests that each protagonist possesses their own unique story to tell, including the captain's daughter, Sorrow, Florens, who is enslaved by a Portuguese lady, Lina, and Florin's mother.

The concept of a world devoid of racial hierarchy is often depicted as an idealized and distant realm, akin to a dreamscape, with qualities reminiscent of Eden or a utopia (Lubiano, 1997). Toni Morrison, the first African-American recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature, does not particularly embrace this categorization, as it implies a separation between black individuals and the rest of humanity. From the very beginning, Morrison has been dedicated to constructing an original literary project and narrative using a new language that celebrates the significance of sounds and music in the act of reading and shaping her artistic works. The presence of internal music within her works is crucial for the comprehension and understanding of the implications of the events portrayed. This can be observed in novels like *Jazz* (1992), which is part of a trilogy where the process of comprehending a sentence in language bears a resemblance to grasping a theme in music, as highlighted by Wittgenstein (2009).

*A Mercy* emerges as a significant milestone in Morrison's career. In fact, it is the greatest American novel in the past twenty-five years. This novel shows Morrison's exceptional talent in various aspects, including its titles, craftsmanship, narrative technique, aesthetic appeal, profound subject matter, unique proposition, captivating poetic language, influential power, historical exploration, and meticulous research. These qualities position *A Mercy* as a work that resonates deeply with readers, much like her masterpiece 'Beloved,' if not in direct proximity to it. It is worth noting that both novels share a common backdrop rooted in America's past and explore the theme of a slave mother's sacrifices for her children, whether through their abandonment or tragic demise, in order to protect them. This connection has led critics to consider *A Mercy* as a prelude to 'Beloved.'

critics have, correctly, identified resonances between *A Mercy* and Morrison's 1987 masterpiece, *Beloved*, such as the motif of a slave mother harming or abandoning her daughter in order to protect the child from an even greater evil under the twisted circumstances of slavery.

(Shands and Mikrut, 2014)

In the title, the word "mercy" does not specifically refer to the mercy of a higher power or a collective community based on their actions or values. Instead, it draws from its English origin, where it is preceded by the indefinite article "a." This suggests that the novel focuses on a singular act of mercy originating from one individual within a world that is largely lacking in mercy.

Morrison's intention in writing her novel is to separate the issue of slavery from race. By setting the story three centuries in the past, she aims at reflecting the historical reality that slavery was not initially confined to a specific race, but encompassed individuals of various races, including white Europeans, mulattoes, and Native Americans. In an

interview with Neary, Morrison explains that *A Mercy* is an attempt to imagine a pre-racist society by uncoupling slavery and racism (De Voss, 2017). Contrary to popular stereotypes, some Europeans willingly traded their freedom for the promise of a better life in New America, often depicted as a utopian dreamland or a vast opportunity for exploration. However, beneath the surface of this historical narrative, some ships transported Europe's destitute prostitutes, orphans, and homeless individuals who had to choose between imprisonment or entering into contract service, which was essentially a euphemism for slavery.

It is important to recognize that slavery has been a part of various civilizations throughout history, and race is a foreign construct imposed upon it. *A Mercy* explores the theme of slavery in its broadest sense, depicting its most violent manifestations through the experiences of women, particularly mothers, and children, particularly orphans. Morrison weaves a complex narrative in which four women, each representing different societal vulnerabilities such as poverty, orphanhood, homelessness, and exploitation, are all enslaved in different ways.

Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* has been heralded by critics as one of the top ten novels published in September 2008, with editions printed in New York and Toronto. In this concise yet potent work, Morrison revisits her signature theme, delving into the abyss of slavery to unearth the suffering at its genesis, tracing back to the dawn of modern American history and the transatlantic voyage from Africa to the North American continent. Morrison wields her narrative to pose probing questions about autonomy and the ethical communal responses that slavery elicits within American society (Tally, 2007). She sifts through the early historical pages of what is now known as America, blending imagination with plausible realities to decipher the mechanisms that shaped a society that has ascended to the world's foremost power in contemporary times.



The esteemed English critic Harold Bloom, in his critique of Toni Morrison's oeuvre, remarks: "Toni Morrison is a novelist of extraordinary gifts. In my judgment, her principal narratives break into two clearly defined groups. The first is constituted The Bluest Eye (1970), Sula (1973), and Song of Solomon (her best achievement 1977)" (Bloom, 2002). Bloom goes further to discuss the second category, which includes Morrison's later novels 'Jazz' (1992) and 'Paradise' (1998). He observes that these works strongly mirror Morrison's self-identification as African-American, nationalist, and Marxist. They imbue an ideology and political stance that may not always align seamlessly with their characters and narratives. However, Morrison herself has commented on this aspect in an interview regarding her books: "So, I don't see those separations too much, between what is artistic and what is political" (Morrison, 2016). Her narratives are replete with complexity and diverse voices, which may initially disorient the reader, particularly in the opening sections. However, as the story unfolds, Morrison meticulously unveils the profound layers of her characters and the events that shape their existence. The stories hark back to the dawn of the seventeenth century, to the onset of migration from diverse horizons and the shaping of this land that seemed as uncharted as if no man had trod since Noah.

The beginning of the novel involved the recruitment of individuals as slaves. Enslavers employed them as wage earners in this region. The narrative of *A Mercy* unfolds in the year 1690, taking us back in time to provide detailed portraits of the characters and the circumstances that bring them together on a farm in northern Virginia. This indicates that slavery has a long-standing presence in the history of various nations, starting from the utilization of slave labor. As stated by Westermann (1955), "Slavery existed throughout the history of antiquity alongside free labor as a consistent element within the evolving social and economic structure."

Morrison is one of the most influential voices in American literature, unafraid to confront the lingering ghosts that haunt the black community and its history. Morrison's

novels have been extensively studied and analyzed in universities and academic institutions across America and the Western world, reaching millions of readers worldwide despite attempts to marginalize her work. Despite her advanced age, Morrison remains deeply engaged with profound issues, demonstrating a personal connection to her own destiny and concern for aging, much like her fellow novelists Philip Roth (75 years old) and Gabriel García Márquez (81 years old), among others. Published in 2008 and set in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Morrison's novel *A Mercy* transports readers back to seventeenth-century America, specifically its final years. It narrates the journey of a black woman who is sold by her Portuguese master to a farmer in order to settle his debts. Stave and Tally (2011) emphasized this fact saying:

In *A Mercy*, Toni Morrison explores the sites and politics of home, the most fundamental way in which humans come into physical contact with the nonhuman world. The novel provides models of social and ecological habitation.....from the displacement of indigenous people to the consumption of natural resources to the trafficking in human flesh. Set at the close of the seventeenth century, at the dawn of the slave trade when race was not yet rhetorically constructed as an absolute category.

In Toni Morrison's novel *A Mercy*, mercy and the bushvi Doctrine holds significant importance. The character Florens, a displaced slave seeking refuge, encounters a stranger who poses the question, "Christianity or infidelity?" Morrison sees this phrase as an echo of former US President George W. Bush's infamous remarks following the events of September 2001 "either you are with us, or you are with terrorists"(Bush, 2001). However, Morrison does not directly refer to the world-changing events or the alleged war on terror like other writers such as John O'Bedek, Don Delillo, Claire Mesood, and Joseph O'Neill. Instead, she presents a vision of violence, cruelty, and shame without using her work as a metaphor for specific events. The novel can be interpreted as a novel about the present,

exploring the role of religion. While it raises doubts about the founding and collective aspects of religion, it does not express surprise towards the concept of religion itself and cannot envision a world without worship. Morrison delves into the issue of religion in American society, highlighting its divisive nature and its historical significance as a teacher of American identity during the seventeenth century.

What separates *Beloved* from *A Mercy* most blatantly is the absence of a community in the latter work. Whereas the community initially fails Baby Suggs and Sethe, once they recognize their common humanity they come together to save themselves and Sethe. In *A Mercy*, however, no community coheres anywhere. Rather, we are given a sprinkling of coreligionists who gather together seemingly for the purpose of antagonizing those who do not share their beliefs.

(Montgomery, 2013)

The origins and sufferings of the characters in *A Mercy* are diverse, yet they converge under a thematic umbrella that showcases the author's exceptional storytelling skills. As we delve into the narrative, the chronology of interconnected events gradually unfolds, prompting our minds to reorganize and make sense of them. The novel's structure is enigmatic, with a deliberate hierarchy and a poetic, metaphorical language that mirrors the content deeply rooted in the seventeenth-century chronology. During this period, the traditions of slavery were still fresh in the colonies. It is worth noting that several of Morrison's novels, including *A Mercy*, employ a belated or deferred structure, where a pivotal event is revealed late in the narrative, disrupting the chronological order of events. The abridgment of the novel's plan, in brief, goes against the writer's intention to create ambiguity, suspense, and surprise for the reader. The opening chapter, although strong, presents itself with a sense of emptiness as it introduces references and attributions to characters and events that are not yet fully comprehensible to the reader. This deliberate puzzlement and confusion may test the reader's patience, but it ultimately

leads to a rewarding conclusion. Similar to the styles of Joyce and Faulkner, Morrison does not readily provide clear meanings or easily reveal her secrets. This intentional withholding of information may disrupt the novel's artistic balance and influential power. The aim is to unsettle the reader, encouraging them to progress through the story at an uncertain pace. This technique adds depth and intrigue to the storytelling, as noted by Wyatt (2017).

I think that Best approves of *A Mercy's* "abandonment" of the reader because it leaves the text of slavery, minus all attachments to the reader and therewith to the present, in "a world of its own"—cut off from affective ties to present readers, discontinuous with the present, over and done and complete in itself.

*A Mercy* explores the dynamics between characters such as Jacob, the Portuguese Catholic farm owner, and the Protestant merchant, who experiences tension during dinner. The wife of the farm owner dresses in piety to conceal her anger and cruelty. Additionally, the servant perceives the slave Florens as a curse upon the man and his children. Morrison's novel celebrates the agricultural culture that accompanied the 'discoverers' and 'missionaries'. However, Morrison also subtly critiques these traditions. The land and agricultural life depicted in the novel do not appear to be exclusively owned by any particular racial or ethnic group, suggesting a sense of deception. Throughout *A Mercy*, Morrison incorporates the pastoral theme, utilizing motifs and themes of idealized country and agricultural life. This is evident in her vivid descriptions of the early American landscape (A Mercy, 2024)

In this novel, the main character Jacob Vaark, whose name suggests Dutch origins, inherits a trade and business from his father. It is clear in the narrative that Jacob does not engage in the trading of human beings. However, the Portuguese farmer, De Ortega, who relies on the labor of enslaved individuals, offers Jacob the choice of any of his slaves to



settle a debt. Jacob selects a woman with a son and a daughter. The woman then quietly expresses that it is not herself, but her daughter Florin, who should be chosen.

Jacob Vaark, had a challenging upbringing in an orphanage but later became a successful merchant and rancher. He unexpectedly inherits land in Upper New York State from an unknown uncle. Interestingly, Jacob holds a complex perspective on slavery. While he personally views it as a deplorable trade, referring to it as the most wretched business, he still engages in practices that indirectly benefit from the institution. He participates in the production of goods such as sugar and wine, which rely on slave labor, and also provides financial support to slave traders and owners. This creates a moral contradiction within Jacob, as he manages to justify his involvement in these industries while maintaining a sense of purity and self-esteem, as long as he does not directly engage with the chains and whips associated with slavery.

As is characteristic of Morrison's writing, she skillfully exposes the intricate psychological conflicts within her characters. In *A Mercy*, she offers a unique portrayal of individuals who amass wealth while attempting to preserve their moral integrity, as long as they do not directly confront the harsh realities of slavery. But the personality of this European (Jacob) is not devoid of benevolent features that distinguish him from the feudal lords of his time. He does not practice violence with his slaves. He does not delay in saving the life of a small animal in the wilderness. Puritanical traditions and the mask of piety and good taste that hides cruelty, arrogance, evil and ignorance alienated him. Jacob is (allegedly) a reluctant slave owner.

Ultimately, Jacob's focal points present an eco-critical dilemma between ownership, ideology, and humanity. The ideology of human enslavement somehow does not contaminate his love for the creatures of the environment..."(Stave.Tally, 2011). However, the humanity of this simple farmer in his appearance and life does not prevent him loving merchants whom he despised for their luxurious lives and luxurious homes. He starts

building a huge house. He summons a blacksmith from the freed blacks to erect for him a sumptuously decorated iron gate, surmounted on either side by the head of a copper snake.

In this narrative, Lina, a 14-year-old Native American girl, holds the belief that the grand gate being constructed by Vaark, a European colonizer, symbolizes paradise for the colonizers but brings curses upon the natives. Settlers took Lina, who survived a deadly epidemic that wiped out her village, and raised her with Christian teachings but denied her entry into their church. She is a character who embodies self-restraint and draws from various religions and forgotten rituals. Lina combines European and local traditions, using the Bible and her innate consciousness to uncover hidden meanings “Lina pieces together a hybrid counter-culture” (Montgomery, 2013). Rebekka joined her later, a 16-year-old European woman who marries Vaark to escape a life of poverty, crime, and debauchery. Rebekka gives birth to several children but tragically loses them to diseases and other circumstances.

Then Sorrow followed them, an 11-year-old mulatto girl who resided with her father, the captain, aboard a ship that fell victim to a piracy operation. Sorrow, the sole survivor, endured a traumatic experience and was left in a state of desolation. Through mysterious circumstances, she eventually washed up on a beach, and nearly drowned. The family who discovered her named her “Sorrow” and sought to rid themselves of her. They presented her to Vaark, who unknowingly took her in, unaware that she was pregnant. Next, we have Florens, an 8-year-old slave of black Portuguese descent. Vaark accepted Florens as partial payment for a debt owed by her owner, Señor de Ortega. Señor de Ortega, a Portuguese tobacco farm owner in Maryland and a slave trader, had suffered the loss of a ship carrying enslaved individuals in Barbados. When Florens' mother had the opportunity to choose, she made the heartbreaking decision to sacrifice her own daughter, entrusting her to Vaark in the hopes that he possessed the qualities of mercy that could spare Florens from a life of servitude under the cruel Señor.

Florens's mother knows that there is no way to protect her daughter from the violence of slavery. Giving Florens away is the only possibility to rescue her from the hands of the slave owner D'Ortega, the only chance to save her from rape on this particular plantation. Since she sees Jacob as a man of relative kindness and integrity, she desperately urges him to buy Florens.

(Nehl, 2016)

Florens is the central and sole character in the novel, sharing the narrative alternately with the narrator (writer). At the age of sixteen, she becomes infatuated with the blacksmith, a confident young man who exudes passion and masculinity. He becomes the one who enlightens her about the realities of slavery. It is not coincidental that Morrison introduces a liberated African character among the enslaved. Morrison intends for him to serve as a voice of truth, reminding the enslaved individuals of their inherent humanity. The exploration of self-ownership and the struggle to find solace externally transforms into an internal surrender, where the slave becomes enslaved to their own desires without any control over them. Hence, it is not surprising when the blacksmith, in their final encounter, addresses Florens as he banishes her from his home, saying, "you are a slave... Your head is empty and your body is wild... Own yourself, woman, and leave us be... You are nothing but wilderness. No constraint. No mind" (Morrison, 2008).

Florens, a young girl forced into slavery by her mother out of fear of her falling into sinful hands, develops feelings for a freed slave who works as a blacksmith and constructs the gate for Jacob's farm. The novel delves into the intense desires that simmer within Florens as she observes the blacksmith in his craft. These desires drive her to seek solace in the cowshed, attempting to suppress the lust that consumes her. In their final encounter, the blacksmith rejects her not because she is Jacob's slave, but because she is enslaved by her own desires. He implores her to exercise self-control, remarking, "You are nothing but wilderness. No restraint. No rationality" (Morrison, 2008).

Towards the end of the novel, Florens attains self-ownership and embarks on writing her own story, etching it onto the abandoned house of her deceased master using her nails. The novel itself is characterized by its somber and desolate tone, punctuated by tragic moments. Its significance lies in its portrayal of American history, specifically the history of the enslavement and exploitation. The novel unequivocally condemns the notion of sovereignty over others as unacceptable and evil. Throughout the narrative, the theme of self-interest permeates, with its victims being the casualties of these self-serving motives. Rebekka, Jacob's wife, is sent from Britain to her husband, whom she has never met, to settle a debt. A mother, driven by fear, forces her daughter Florens into slavery to protect her from perceived danger. African slaves, unable to be killed but instead sold, are exploited due to their victimhood "Toni Morrison is the most formally sophisticated novelist in the history of African American Literature.... Her novels show the victimization of black people within the context of a racist social order" (Sharmely, 2016). Consequently, the novel explores the relativity of good and evil, with no character embodying pure evil except for the Portuguese slave trader, who appears comparatively civilized when contrasted with typical slave traders. In this narrative, both heroes and villains are victims, as certain preconceived notions often shape the perception of victims.

The narrative crafted by Morrison aligns with the broader American narrative surrounding the creation of a heavenly paradise on Earth. Jacob Vaark, enumerating of the blessings the Lord bestowed him , including the land and the farm with its iron gate adorned with whale engravings, holds the belief that he is fulfilling the divine providence and the desires of the Lord by journeying to the New World in an attempt to establish a new Edenic home (Stave. Tally, 2011). Lina, on the other hand, is the daughter of the indigenous people, whose family was tragically wiped out by the invading forces. She was taken in by the invaders, raised in their midst, and educated in the teachings of the Presbyterian faith, which incorporate the Lord's teachings. Despite her adherence to these teachings, Lina feels excluded and is not permitted to attend Sunday Mass.



Lina holds the belief that the so-called paradise is, in fact, a damned paradise, where anyone who enters the farm becomes part of a cursed land. This paradise is built upon the injustice of exterminating the indigenous “Amerindians” and the sin of forcibly deporting and enslaving millions of Africans “Black Africa was conquered and colonized and a good part of its population was scattered and enslaved in the Americas, and the Amerindians were exterminated, either physically or culturally...”(Chinweizu,1975). Lina perceives the true snakes to be the “Eurobiz” white men, whom she believes carry the stench of disease and death and introduce smallpox and a cruel religion to the new land, represented by a monotonous God-lacking imagination.

In Morrison's narrative, Vaark appears to be a relatively good man, as close as a European can be portrayed, far from the evil that Earth's daughter Lina sees. On his farm, there is both a native and an African slave. As mentioned earlier, Vaark refuses to engage in land trading and demonstrates an understanding of the sensitivities surrounding the place. Being in the land ‘Maryland’, where the novel unfolds, he respects the land and its inhabitants. His acceptance of Florens was compelled by her mother's insistence, fearing that she might fall into the hands of cruel masters. Compared to slave traders and other farmers, Vaark appeared to be a more compassionate individual in her eyes.

Jacob demonstrates a refusal to engage in land trading and shows sensitivity towards the land and its inhabitants on his farm. His acceptance of Florens is driven by the mother's fear of her falling into the hands of cruel masters, and he is seen as a more humane person compared to slave traders and farmers. However, like other white settlers, Jacob is not without fault. His wealth is derived from the enslavement of individuals on a sugar field in the Caribbean, and the construction of his house involved forcibly uprooting fifty trees. Tragically, his daughter dies before witnessing the completion of the house. Rebekka, Jacob's wife, hailing from London, carries memories and images of violence,

executions, and human atrocities from her past. Despite her efforts to care for Florens and compete with Lina, Rebekka is portrayed as a good woman.

Rebekka understands that the raw brutality of public executions and the blood lust of the crowds who attend and re-live them in the retelling are part of daily life in London; nothing she will see in the colonies can equal the cruelty to which she has already been exposed.

(Smith, 2012)

The novel suggests that both sickness and unwavering faith may have been the afflictions that befell the Europeans who seized the land. However, they were not the sole recipients of this curse. *A Mercy* also implicates Africans who participated in the slave trade, as depicted through the account of a woman departing on a ship to Barbados. She observes that men seem to thrive on exerting power and control over various aspects of life, including cattle, women, water, and crops. Eventually, tensions escalate to the point where men from their families burn down homes and capture those they cannot kill or trade (Morrison, 2008).

Ironically, Vaarke tragically succumbs to smallpox immediately after completing his grand house, leading to the unfortunate felling of fifty trees. The disease poses a grave threat to the life of his wife, who is also bedridden, prompting Florens to embark on a perilous journey to seek help from the blacksmith, who had previously treated Sorrow for the same illness. The neglect of the farm further compounds the challenges faced by its inhabitants, as there looms a more ominous danger that could potentially jeopardize their well-being. Morrison skillfully portrays the harsh reality faced by vulnerable women, whose fates are not bound by the same shelter. These women struggle to survive in the absence of their master, and the potential loss of the white lady of the house would further diminish their chances of survival.

Nevertheless, Sir's death signals a dramatic turning point of the story, when the world as Jacob's women have known crumbles around them and scatters into pieces. The patriarch's decease and his grand dwelling destroy the females' bonding and community, further emphasizing women's powerlessness to control the domestic sphere under the patriarch's rule, or even their lives and destinies, decisively dependent on him.

(Ramirez, 2015)

Florens embarks on a challenging and intimidating journey through a wilderness teeming with predators and snakes, expressing her thoughts through a powerful and impassioned monologue. Her voice serves as both a necessary outlet for the reader's emotions and a source of satisfaction. It is imbued with raw poetry and intense passion. In her own words, she describes:

I have never witnessed leaves that bleed such vivid hues of red and gold. The colors are so vibrant that they almost hurt the eyes, and to find solace, I find myself gazing at the vast expanse of the heavens beyond the tree line. During the night, when the brightness of the day gives way to the sparkling stars adorning the cold black sky, I leave Lina sleeping and retreat to this room.

(Morrison, 2008)

By the end of the novel, it becomes apparent that the heroine, Florens, has been narrating her story to her absent lover from the very beginning. This revelation explains the absence of the addressee's voice throughout the narrative. Towards the end of the novel, Florens clandestinely enters one of the lower rooms of the house and begins to etch her words onto the walls. These words are numerous, to the point where houses alone cannot contain them. They require the air to carry them and scatter them like ashes across the wilderness and valleys. Ultimately, Florens realizes that she must rely solely on herself to survive. She acknowledges that forgiveness is not an option, and she must be unforgiving

in order to assert her freedom. In her final words, she declares, “No Ruth, my love. None. Hear me? Slave. Free. I last.” (Morrison, 2008)

Vaark, once gentle and benevolent, offered solace and shelter to women who otherwise faced the insecurities of a terrifying wilderness and the presence of extremely devout colonies. Yet, he is the same man who built his wealth by fueling a sinister trade clad in deceit, dealing in the currency of human lives. Rebekka, the kind-hearted woman who toiled alongside Lina on the farm and became a wing to Florens, the child, once despised the stifling presence of zealous religious factions. However, after the loss of her children and husband, and having survived illness, she emerges transformed, aligning herself with a Puritan sect. Her disposition grows stern, her interactions brusque, forbidding anyone the warmth of her hearth, relegating them to the icy embrace of the outdoors or the cowshed's confines. In a twist of fate, she marks Florens and Sorrow for sale. Closer ties with the Anabaptists see her spirit wane, her demeanor to the serving women grows increasingly harsh; by the novel's close, she contemplates the sale of Sorrow and Florens—a diminished soul dealing in cruelty. (Smith, 2012)

The unexpected voice of Florens's mother in the final chapter strikes the reader with poignancy. Her words, laden with the themes of mercy, resonate with the sting of abandonment and the harshness of cruelty, reaching out to a daughter forever bereft of hearing her mother's side of the story. Morrison probes the irrationality of those who, sharing the common wounds of racial marginalization, nonetheless impose upon each other the added burdens of social exclusion, further darkening their already grim realities. (Bashirahishize, 2018). Morrison, no stranger to exploring tragedies, cruelty, and horror, now weaves into her narrative the complex threads of desire and wonder. Her prowess in distillation shines through in this work—a novel where history, poetry, and psychology are interlaced within a tightly-knit structure, all within the span of a mere 167 pages.



## Conclusion

It becomes overt that *A Mercy* provides a comprehensive examination of the history of slavery since the seventeenth-century slave trade in America. It effectively portrays slavery as a prevalent and accepted practice within American society, particularly among the new colonizers. This is what sets this narrative apart from other works, encompassing not only black Africans but also Native American Indians, and to some extent, even the enslavement of whites by their fellow whites. This multifaceted perspective sheds light on the complex dynamics and various dimensions of slavery during that time. An exemplary illustration can be found in the character of the wife of Vaark.

The novel places significant emphasis on history, particularly the history of slaves and the exploitation of slaves physically and psychologically. To do so, **it** delves deep into the historical records, shedding light on the multitude of events and defining characteristics of that era. One crucial aspect that the novel highlights is the fact that America was a European colony. Morrison portrays America as a land of aspirations and opportunities for the colonizers, effectively capturing the dreams and ambitions associated with this new frontier. In addition, the novel focuses on expressing the behaviors and actions of the colonizers, highlighting their notable pursuits such as land ownership, investments, and the slave trade. These concepts are central to the narrative and serve as significant elements explored within the novel. Furthermore, the novel provides a panoramic view of the various influences of religion and its profound significance in the societal fabric of that era. It offers multiple references to the role of religion and its impact on the lives of individuals and the broader community during that time period. In certain segments of society, religion is regarded as the bedrock of American identity. Within the novel, this notion is

exemplified through the characters and their actions, showcasing the prevalent religious tensions among the diverse population of that time. The concept of America as a sought-after paradise is deeply intertwined with religious inspiration, permeating every facet of the narrative.

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