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Writing Resistance: an Understanding of the Narratives of Empowerment in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*

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Abstract

Language is the medium by which one's psychological experiences, emotions and imaginations can be recreated in the minds of the reader or listener. Through ages language has been the vehicle with which humans have communicated ideas to each other. Language has not only the power to heal and to comfort but also to retrieve the suppressed experiences of an individual from the past. This paper seeks to discuss Toni Morrison's novel *A Mercy* as a text that explores the common language uncommonly well in using it as a double edged sword. She subverts language in a rather complex play of words employing it as a powerful tool for the survival and continuance of existence for the voiceless. It becomes a means of identity construction as much as a tool of empowerment, for the marginalized to overcome their traumatic experiences.

Key words: Toni Morrison, Suppressed Self, trauma, identity, language

1. Introduction

Language whether written or spoken does influence in the construction of our thoughts. It is a wide knowledge that the relationship between thoughts and language is interactive; both processes continuously influencing each other in many ways. Literature which has often reflected on society's experiences and has also fostered ways of thinking. Toni Morrison's uses novels as tools of retrieval that creates a communal experience for their readers. The language in her novel affects the readers according to their association. Her novels retrieve on individual and collective stories of racial subjugation and cultural disintegration that speak the experience of being on the margins. In much the same way, Rosenblatt (2014) in *Impact of Racism on African American Families: Literature as Social Science* maintains that "Toni Morrison talked about her emphasis on black culture (including black language)...as she conceptualized it seems to be partly in response to, in defense against and constrained by the racial system" (p.13). To some extent, such a process of reading becomes a means for an emancipative and exploratory experience. Language has not only the power to retrieve but also to heal and to comfort the victims from traumatized experiences. This paper attempts to focus on Morrison use of language as a powerful tool in *A Mercy* to retrieve the buried self suppressed into oblivion in both the characters and the readers.

Sharing stories and exchanging experience since time immemorial is noted as a prominent source of cultural enrichment. In addition to that the characters in Morrison who share stories with one another it also involve the reader participate in these stories to unravel them. The reader's participation along with her protagonists in unraveling the story is greatly encouraged by Morrison. Little by little, the reader has to pick up the information and piece it together and, in doing so, participates in the communal effort of reading the stories.

2. Language of Protest

One of the ways in which Toni Morrison exerts the power of language in her novels is through unearthing the historical past of Afro-American's and in rediscovering one's identity in the world. Morrison(1992) in her essay, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* reiterates that hitherto American narrative has recorded the stories of African Americans as "other," thus far without integrating the African-American experience into the American master narrative.

Nobel Prize laureate Toni Morrison's novels are well known for her theme in revisiting the Afro-American history. The primary thematic concern in most Morrison's novels is the trauma of slavery and racial prejudices experienced by Afro- Americans. She uses language to retrieve the experience of Afro- American cultural traditions, and sense of identity. Language becomes a means by which the lives of African Americans history and culture are preserved. The Theory of Trauma argues that for its victims, denial of horrible events seems to be the easiest way out. Judith Herman(1997) in her book on *Trauma and Recovery* reveals that "The conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma." (p.1) It is also due to traumatic suffering that they do not speak of the occurrences and the 'self', itself that is subject to trauma, is kept suppressed.

Therefore, Morrison undertakes narration as a communal act, manipulating the voices of her characters. She does not involve a first person narrator whereas multiple voices combine to weave the story. Like in *Beloved*, Morrison introduces oral narrative techniques like use of repetition, a shifting narrative voice and re-memory in a rather complex pattern in shaping the narrative structure of the novel.

Instead of the predominant narrative, Morrison makes use of the Call/Response pattern of writing which holds special significance in Afro-American oral tradition. This technique serves not only as a medium through which actual history is being revisited but also as means of accepting and healing traumatic experience. Morrison unlike the traditional writers involves her reader/listener in a collaborative exercise in filling the gaps in conversation to unveil the story.

Her novel *A Mercy* (Morrison, 2008) not only deals with the black's history of slavery, depiction of individual's identity but also contemplates on the reclamation of black self. The complicated narrative structure, masterfully combines with Afro-American oral tradition, pose a challenge alike to the readers and to the literary critics. The focus of her novel revives on the often taken for granted issues as race and identity of the African Americans' in America. The language spoken by Morrison's characters depict on the influence of gender and social, cultural, geographical and historical backgrounds in the language forms they represent. Readers might perceive that Morrison's characters do not speak a "standard" form of English. The characters articulate in a language that deviates from the "standard" form of English to assert their individuality. For example, Floren's use of a double negative and the characters use of the word 'ain't reflects language choices that may not be considered "standard". Morrison also makes use of orality in written language as an expression of protest to share the experiences of women who suffer varying forms of oppression. As Atkinson (2000) notes, "The language of Morrison's texts mirrors the oral tradition of Black English. The story being told is defined by the systems of language that are evident in the oral tradition." (Atkinson 13)

The oral tradition of Black English expects the reader to fill in those gaps with communal knowledge. As Morrison states in an interview to Claudia Tate(1983) , "My writing expects, demands participatory reading, and that I think is what literature is supposed to do. It's not just about the story, it's all about involving the reader. The reader supplies the emotions. The reader supplies even the color, some of the sound. My language has to have holes and spaces so the

reader can come into it" (Tate 164). The text plays a vital role in documenting and testifying the unspeakable horrors of slavery through participatory language. Morrison achieves an oral quality within her written work by including characters who tell stories to one another as well as to the reader, favoring the first person's voice. Through articulation of these stories, the listeners can understand and empathize with them in their grief. This process also helps to facilitate reconnection with one's social environment thereby allowing the victim to reclaim the suppressed traumatized self.

Morrison employs writing techniques that register her protest similar to those of slave narratives. In *A Mercy*, the oral tradition she employs both thematically and structurally retells the history of African Americans through their memories, stories and tales passed to each other that resemble call and response pattern in the oral narrative. The call and response conversations that the characters engage are long, meaningful and intimate verbatim as depicted in the novels through Florens and Lina or Sorrow speaking to her imaginative Twin in *A Mercy*. In narrating past traumatic experiences these characters undergo a therapeutic effect through the articulation. The protagonists in the novels are portrayed as individuals unable to recover their 'selves' as they do not remember the past clearly. Nonetheless, the healing lies in the articulation or in the narration of events. As the suppressed self can be retrieved only when painful memories are retold. The novel does demonstrate ways in which language not only merely reflects the world, but can also directly affect it.

As Schreiber (2010) notes that in *A Mercy*, Morrison explores the search for self, and the process of owning oneself in an unfamiliar environment: Creating a self and owning it, in spite of homelessness, constitutes the true mercy one can achieve. [...] the concept of home [is] crucial to combating the trauma Morrison reveals in her novels. (Schreiber, p.30)

Florens the protagonist in *A Mercy* works through her personal trauma and overcomes it in the course of retelling her traumatic experience. She reclaims herself through the community's support, and character's support, in reconstructing her broken self-identity. Florens, an outcaste in the novel is initially portrayed as someone with an obsession for the Senhora D'Ortega discarded shoes. Her desire to emulate the Senhora meets with disapproval from Lina, as she recalls her words later "Lina says, my feet are useless, will always be too tender for life and never have the strong soles, tougher than leather that life requires" (*A Mercy* 4). However, towards the end of the novel literally and symbolically her soles become much tougher as a result of her journey seeking her identity from the blacksmith and she no longer in need of the shoes.

3. Language of Parody

Language is inseparable from us as a community of human beings with a specific form and character. Since language is a medium of power, writings from the margin define itself by rejecting the language of the Centre and by supplanting it with their own. Morrison's characters, who have been rendered voiceless and helpless in their victimization yet speak and command reason through her novels. Moore(2011) in his article points out that, In the aftermath of postmodernism, parody and deconstruction become weapons with which writers like Morrison can excavate and recreate history, and then question the legitimacy of established "truths" of the master discourse on race and class...in *A Mercy*. (Moore 2)

The characterization of Florens is embodied as one who will not be confined by slavery. "I walk alone except for the eyes that join me on my journey...I losing something with every step I take. I can feel the drain. Something precious is leaving me. I am a thing apart...Sudden it is not

like before when I am always in fright. I am not afraid of anything now.” (*A Mercy* 114-115). Though the journey taken by Florens at the very beginning might have been tainted with her traumatic separation from her mother yet she excavates her past and establishes her “truth” is able to attain self worth and belonging at the end with a compromise to herself. She steers herself quietly away from dwelling upon the unanswerable “Why?” of her traumatic past and refocuses herself by saying “Slave. Free. I last” (*A Mercy* 161).

Morrison, through her novels, bears witness to the obliterated and often suppressed history of the Afro-Americans. In breaking the silence of the unspeakable, she confronts the much elusive past of slavery. Morrison(1984) reveals the significance of bearing witness in her essay titled “Memory, Creation and Writing” which emphasizes:

If my work is to be functional to the group then it must bear witness and identify that which is useful from the past and that which ought to be discarded; it must make it possible to prepare for the present and live it out, and it must do that not by avoiding problems and contradictions but by examining them (Morrison 389).

Critic Moore(2011) refers to her novel *A Mercy* “ By presenting and then refuting established truths of the master discourse, parody keeps the memory of the experience alive, for it is constantly before us to recall, to remember, so that we will not repeat history and its trauma” (Moore 2)

Morrison keeps the memory of the contemporary generation alive by presenting history in a language that recollects the culture of a group. In the essay on “Reproducing Wise women” Fulmer(2007) points out that, “Morrison’s language shows so much respect for the characters’ experience...” (p.144) that she takes her readers to the time of action i.e in the *A Mercy* the era of 1680’s of the new world, where slaves were not taken into account as a human but rather as goods to be traded. Florens was looked upon as a commodity that would fetch money by the white traders as they assess her in their tradesman language, they remark: “the girl was worth twenty pieces of eight, considering the number of years ahead of her and reducing the balance by three hogsheads of tobacco or fifteen English pounds” (*A Mercy* 27).

Aware of her position as a black American writer Morrison parodies the language of the Masters as a means of expression to write back to the centre by using the imperial language. The novel speaks about the powers of language that gives identity to the characters. Like Florens, Minha ma`e, has been a victim of the slave trade that gave an identity that she inhuman but enunciating “I was negrita” (*A Mercy* 165). She fears the same destiny might befall for her daughter as for her that one word wiped out all of her heritage and past: “Language, dress, gods, dance, habits, decoration, song -- all of it cooked together in the color of my skin” (*A Mercy* 165).

The language of the master which leaves her wordless still serves its purpose when it is subverted. As for Florens she survives through her writings, in recording her narrative on the walls of Jacob’s unfinished mansion. This progression is due precisely, to the looking forward, to the future, rather than remaining mired in the past. Florens scrawls her story in the wood of one of the rooms in Vaark’s unoccupied “mighty” house. She observes, “There is no more room in this room. These words cover the floor. . . . These careful words, closed up and wide open, will talk to themselves. . . . Perhaps these words need the air that is out in the world. Need to fly up then fall, fall like ash over acres of primrose and mallow” (*A Mercy* 160-61). Her inscriptions on the walls become a path towards self-discovery in which she reclaims her heart and voice: “I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. No ruth, my love. Hear me? Slave. Free. I last” (*A Mercy* 161).

Florens' learns the power of words during her journey to her beloved blacksmith, the free black man she feels she cannot live without. Her words transform her into someone and give her a voice that allows her to be more than a slave, as it allows her to claim herself. While the letter of ownership from Rebekka Vaark stating that "she is owned by me" (*A Mercy* 112) makes her a slave, the words she writes on the walls of the house make her free self.

4. Language of Empathy

Morrison weaves the tale so skillfully through the voices of her female ensemble that the story seems not so much to be told but to emerge with empathy. The reader is asked to use his or her imagination to participate in the creation of this story. She retrieves the disremembered and the unaccounted grappling with rememory of trauma in the context of slavery. There is an understandable and undeniable link between the spoken word and the closeness of the community.

Florens finds herself right in the middle of a community of women, who come together to lessen their burdens of sorrow and grief and striving to discover themselves. Florens is engrossed in listening to the stories of Lina and devouring them. "Yearning for home" as Lina knew is "Where everyone had anything and no one had everything" she empathizes with Florens (*A Mercy* 60). She not only quenches her thirst for her mother's love through the stories but also regains communal memory.

One of the ways of retrieving the suppressed self is in integration-taking on one another's experiences. A good communal bond is formed between Florens and Lina because Florens is perceived by Lina as ". . . quiet, timid version of herself at the time of her own displacement" (*A Mercy* 61). The doubt, hatred and annoyance among individuals are reconciled the moment they step into the communal bond and share experiences with one another.

Florens and Lina share a common bond, in the midst of their misfortune, that of a hunger and yearning for a mother's love. Morrison highlights their attempt to retrieve their suppressed self. Whilst sharing individual stories, Florens and Lina sometimes scream and cry and the stories passed become a healing ritual to them as their narration has healing and reaffirming nature. Lina has a favorite bedtime story for Florens of a mother who sacrifices her life trying to protect her eggs from the wicked traveler.

The whispered conversation that follows the story always runs into the same line in *A Mercy*, as:

Florens barely breathes "And the eggs?" she asks.

"They hatch alone," says Lina.

"Do they live?" Florens whispering is urgent.

"We have" says Lina

Florens would sigh then...when sleep came the little girl's smile lingered (*A Mercy* 63).

Language is adopted as a tool and utilized to express widely differing cultural experiences. Through the empathetic retelling of an old story of bird eggs left by their mother to "hatch alone" (*A Mercy* p. 73) Lina reminds Florens of their complex lives that are similar to birds orphaned in the wilderness. Besides, Lina herself in recounting the story, resolves the experiences of losing shelter and her tribe decimated by epidemics. Her stories thus serve as her own lessons about the dangers of the world, Lina points to Florens and remind her: "We never shape the world. The

world shapes us.” (*A Mercy* p. 71) Anderson (2013) depicts the relationship between language and power in the book titled *Spectrality in the Novels of Toni Morrison* which argues that “Morrison uses this story to illustrate the responsibility that comes with the manipulation of language because it is in the writer’s hands, like the bird”.(p.146)

In the light of these implications, the above conversation suggests that in the sharing of these stories not only does cultural enrichment take place but a healing also occurs. But more than that, the act also allows Florens to find her way back to herself and become self-empowered. The evidence is in her speech. Addressing her story to the blacksmith, Florens says, “You can think what I tell you a confession, if you like, but one full of curiosities familiar only in dreams and during moments when a dog’s profile plays in the steam of a kettle” (*A Mercy* 3). It reveals her experiences as also who she is as she addresses the blacksmith: “I am happy the world is breaking open for us, yet its newness trembles me” (*A Mercy* 5).

Through her articulation transformation takes place as she gains insight into her mother’s action. Though at the beginning of her articulation, Florens could not understand why her mother gave her away she eventually realizes that her mother did so to give her a better life. The awareness dawns on her at her journey’s end that her mother’s transaction was not an action of betrayal but a sacrifice.

Morrison employs non-linear narrative as the story is revealed through flashbacks from the present to the past as well as participation from the reader in reconstructing the story. At the end of the novel, there is a shift in the narrative voice as Florens’ mother speaks back to her daughter, trying to explain the larger cause of their separation. “One chance,” she says. “There is no protection but there is difference” (166). Moreover she felt “There was no animal in his heart. . . He did not want” (163). No longer interested in her future she begs him to take her daughter because “I saw the tall man see you as a human child, not pieces of eight. I knelt before him. Hoping for a miracle. He said yes” (*A Mercy* 166).

To retrieve oneself from oblivion, one has to remember and then articulate one’s past rather than just remain caught up in the past. Articulation of the past experience is essential because “remembering and telling truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for healing of the individual victims” (Herman 1). Florens in her view recalls the separation from her mother that led her to Vaark’s plantation:

Sir saying he will take instead the woman and the girl, not the baby boy and the debt is gone. A minha mae begs no. Her baby boy is still at her breast. Take the girl, she says, my daughter, she says. Me. Me. Sir agrees and changes the balance due (*A Mercy* 7).

It is further underlined by her recollections of her mother pointing out towards her and pleading with the Plantation owner to take her daughter in her stead. “Me” in Floren’s exploration where she recalls her parting from her mother: “I know it is me because I see it forever and ever. . . Take the girl, she says, my daughter, she says. Me. Me” (*A Mercy* 7).

Her purpose of writing is parallel to that of articulation as it helps her to exorcise the pain. Florens learns of a secret room in the house where she uses the tip of a nail to scratch her story upon the walls intending to be read by the blacksmith. “If you live or ever you heal you will have to bend down to read my telling, crawl perhaps in a few places. I apologize for the discomfort” (158).

In writing on the walls of the deserted house Florens reclaim herself, in unlocking her heart and setting her words free. Florens writes to be heard and to be seen unintended for the blacksmith as she acknowledges that the Blacksmith cannot read yet she articulates that, “these

careful words, closed up and wide open, will talk to themselves" (*A Mercy* 161). The engraved words are not locked up save to themselves, as language gives identity to an individual. Her telling of her story through the walls is an act of assertion of her 'Self' as well as a bid to be understood.

She writes compulsively until her lamp dies out and then she sleeps "among [her] words," even as the "telling goes on without dream" (*A Mercy* 185). She confesses that it is only with difficulty that she is able to extricate herself from the room upon waking. Towards the close of her confession she states, "I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven" (*A Mercy* 161). Ann Hostetler (2014) in her essay on *Toni Morrison Memory and Meaning* observes, "In *A Mercy* the discarded girl acquires a voice. Silence presses against language until the daughter finally writes her story on the walls of the master's house" (p.34).

Morrison aims at the reader's involvement and getting the reader transformed much in the same way as her characters' transformation in the novels through the understanding they gain by the storytelling and song. When we listen to one another the empathy turns tears to laughter. Morrison sums it up beautifully in the novel as "To be given dominion over another is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing" (*A Mercy* 167).

5. Conclusion

This paper illuminates the significance of healing through the participatory narration as identity is created and sustained through language. Since language is a medium of power, writings from the margin define itself by rejecting the language of the Centre and by supplanting it with their own. In order to write specifically African American literature and revisit the nation's history, the writer must reject the language of the dominant culture which created a form of oppression for both African American literature and its criticism. Morrison through the inclusion of call and response dialogues and occurrences of black grammar rejects white mainstream language.

Further, Morrison proves that the essence and power of Afro-American tradition is in their own language which is most capable of expressing their history because the oppression experienced cannot be fully expressed by means of mainstream linguistic form. Therefore, particularly the collective speaking and black characters' language is the most effective means to retell their own history. Language in Morrison's novels functions not only as means of communication and passing on black history, but it also helps them to feel relieved of traumatic experiences.

In other words, her text generates within the reader a feeling of empowerment and a critical consciousness to protest, to parody and to empathize with the centuries of wounds inflicted on them. Through the participatory language of novel and non-linear narratives her representative writing reconstructs the stereotypes in histories. Perhaps then, her novel could be rightly described as an illustration of resistant literature with a commitment to redefine the racial differences prevalent in the nation. Language in her novels is then not simply a means of communication through words and gestures only but an expression which links what happened in the past generations with the present generation. Thus her novel does demonstrate ways in which language not only merely reflects the world, but can also directly affect it.

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