

***Research Paper***

# **Slavery in early America as Portrayed in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* and other novels**

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Since the publication of her debut novel in 1970, Toni Morrison is interested in the black community in America characterized by community life, gossips, and solidarity. However this community is victim of slavery and segregation due to skin complexion. The publication of *A Mercy* in 2008 has provided a new dimension to the scope of her literary motivation. She has gone deep in the history of America at the beginning of the settlement of Europeans in the 1680's to uncover the universal form of slavery without racism including Europeans, native Americans, and blacks. They were servants owned by the gentry that submitted them to harsh work and difficult conditions. In *A Mercy* there exist slaves, indentured servants, and freed blacks. The objective of this research paper is to explore the slavery system without racial pigmentation unknown or forgotten in America. As a matter of fact, Jacob Vaark's farm is a sample selected by Morrison to portray the bondage pattern in the 1680's. Messalina is shortened (Lina), she is an Indian native on the farm. Florens is offered by her mother to pay the debt of her master. Florens's mother is regularly raped, she does not want her daughter to be raped by her master. The blacksmith is a free black man, Willard and Scully are Vaark's Europeans indentured servants, etc. They all work on the same farm together with Vaark's mailed wife Rebekka. Vaark's servants are not happy because they are not free but they do not suffer racial discrimination. They are not happy because the middle passage is unbearable, some prefer to end up in the mouth of the sharks following their ship, but they are not stereotyped as they are blacks, Indians or Europeans. They are servants or free workers.

**Keywords:** Slavery, Indentured servants, free blacks, race, discrimination.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In most of her previous novels Toni Morrison has explored the impacts of racism on both the white and the black American population. African Americans live in communities bordered by cities where white people live. The Black communities are segregated and their inhabitants alienated and lynched. With the publication of her ninth novel, *A Mercy* in 2008, a new aspect was considered taking her to plunge into the infinitely vast and nebulous origin of slavery and human servitude in

America. In *A Mercy*, Toni Morrison has explored a world where slavery exists without being racialized. Slaves, free blacks as well as indentured workers live together. They are: Lina, a Native American slave woman, a mongrel red-haired girl called Sorrow, two European indentured servants called Willard Bond and Scully, a black-Portuguese girl called Florens and the blacksmith, a free black man. Slavery in this novel is portrayed as a universal phenomenon that had been

present in one form or the other in almost all the regions of the world. Both the whites and the colored races were equally subjected to human servitude. Toni Morrison goes back to the origin of slavery in this novel for providing the readers with an opportunity to understand the facts behind racialized slavery in the U.S.A.

The objective of this paper is to uncover the primary system of bondage noticeable in the seventeenth century in America. Toni Morrison has worked to reshape this system in *A Mercy* in order to spotlight the problem of Blacks in the U.S which caused the American Civil War and initiated the Civil Right Movement of the 20th century. In *A Mercy*, Toni Morrison uses the combination of different histories to explore American multiculturalism and to expose at the same time her view about the genesis of the United States of America. Thus, the fragmented narrative produced by this polyphony allows the characters to expose their respective physical and psychological pains while constructing the American national identity. They can be regarded as the representatives of their respective ethnic groups (European, African American, Native American). From this analysis, it can be asserted that *A Mercy* traces back the history of the United States of America. It deeply plunges the reader into the roots of the construction of America's multicultural identity which results from the coexistence of many ethnic groups; namely, Africans, Native Indians and Europeans.

### **Slavery system in America in the nineteenth century and its social impacts**

From the 1520s to the 1860s an estimated 11 to 12 million African men, women, and children were forcibly embarked on European vessels for a life of slavery in the Western Hemisphere. Many more Africans were captured or purchased in the interior of the continent but a large number died before reaching the coast. In an article entitled *Transatlantic Slave Trade* published in Microsoft Encarta Africana Third Edition by S. Behrendt (1998-2000),

About 9 to 10 million Africans survived the Atlantic crossing to be purchased by planters and traders in the New World, where they worked principally as slave laborers in plantation economies requiring a large work force. African peoples were transported from numerous coastal outlets from the Senegal River in West Africa and hundreds of trading sites along the coast as far south as Benguela (Angola), and from ports in Mozambique in southeast Africa. In the New World slaves were sold in markets as far north as New England and as far south as present-day Argentina.

On the ships toward the New World, Ships' officers confined the men, women, boys, and girls in separate

compartments. Slave vessels, according to S. Behrendt (1998-2000), were fitted with numerous wooden platforms between decks to allow captains to pack in greater numbers of captives. As the between-deck space was generally from 1.2 m (4 ft) to 1.8 m (6 ft), platforms reduced the head room for captives to only a few feet. All slaves suffered from numerous scrapes and bruises from lying on these bare planks. Captains claimed that when safely away from shore, slaves were given greater freedom of movement. Women and children, some claimed, were never shackled and were allowed to roam above deck with minimal supervision.

Slaves who survived the middle passage were prepared for sale in slave markets. As described by S. Behrendt (1998-2000) they were revitalized with 'water and colonial provisions (such as citrus fruit) and were shaved and cleaned. Ointments (to hide scars from diseases such as yaws) and oils were applied on their skin in preparation for sale'. Agents placed advertisements in colonial gazettes and in taverns for the sale of African labor, which usually began a few weeks after arrival. Many sales occurred on ship deck; other sales took place on wharves or in agents' houses or slave pens. Some planters contracted with merchants to purchase a preset number of slaves. Many slaves were sold by scramble or by auction. During the scramble, planters or their representatives placed ropes or handkerchiefs around groups of slaves whom they wanted to purchase. During auctions, the highest-valued slaves, often adult men, were first sold; then, over several weeks or even months, less-valued slaves were sold too. The last slaves sold were often old, sick, or debilitated Africans. According to S. Behrendt (1998-2000), they usually were purchased by doctors or poor colonists. In some sales prime slaves were sold by scramble and "refuse" slaves were sold at public auction.

On the plantations of their masters, the living conditions of slaves in the antebellum American South were some of the worst for slaves across history. As legal property of their masters they had no rights themselves and fared far worse than Roman slaves or medieval serfs<sup>1</sup>. Africans sold as slaves in the

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<sup>1</sup> In an article entitled *Slavery in the Roman Economy*, W. Scheidel (2010, p.3) explains that 'Slaves were engaged in an enormous variety of activities, as estate managers, field hands, shepherds, hunters, domestic servants, craftsmen, construction workers, retailers, miners, clerks, teachers, doctors, midwives, wetnurses, textile workers, potters, and entertainers. In addition to private sector employment, they worked in public administration and served in military support functions. They were owned by private individuals as well as the state, communities, temples, and partnerships. As *servi vicarii*, slaves were put at the disposal of fellow slaves. Their responsibilities ranged from the most basic tasks of footmen and water-carriers to the complex duties of stewards and business managers. Slaves could be kept in

Americas had to rely on their owners providing them with housing or building materials, pots and pans for cooking and eating, food and clothing. Many slaves did the best they could with what they were given. Most did not dare complain for fear of receiving a whipping or worse punishment.

By law, slaves were the personal property of their owners in all Southern states except Louisiana. The slave master held absolute authority over his human property as the Louisiana law of June 20 1825 made clear: "The master may sell him, dispose of his person, his industry, and his labor; [the slave] can do nothing, possess nothing, nor acquire anything but what must belong to his master." (Article 35)

Slaves had no constitutional rights; they could not testify in court against a white person; they could not leave the plantation without permission. Slaves often found themselves rented out, used as prizes in lotteries, or as wagers in card games and horse races. When a master died, his slaves were often sold for the benefit of his heirs.

Separation from family and friends was probably the greatest fear a black person in slavery faced. Seth, in *Beloved*, has murdered her daughter, Beloved, for fear of seeing her become a slave as she has been herself. The act is viewed both as a crime and profound love, as her intention is to save her daughter's life from the atrocity of slavery. The atrocity of the living conditions of black slaves has created frustrations of all types. Racial hatred became part of the human tragedy; Blacks were separated from the rest of the community. Toni Morrison refers to the fact in her novels by putting the black and white communities side by side to allow the reader to see segregation at work. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola Breedlove is the only one in her class who sits alone at a double desk. Her teachers never try to glance at her, only when everyone in the class is required to respond. When one of the girls at school wants to be particularly insulting to a boy or wants to get an immediate response from him, she says: "Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove! Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove" (Morrison, 1970, p.34). This shows that blacks have become a target for each opportunity of humiliation and insult as if they are strange creatures and not human beings, who have the right to live, eat, and get education like other citizens in the United States. Pecola screams inside herself asking why everyone she meets does not respect her as a human being, why everyone she meets emphasized that she must stay back. In fact, she is black. As such, she

deserves no respect in a segregated area. One day when Pecola finished her class, a group of boys circled around her and began making fun at her. They said "Black e mo. Black e mo . yadaddsleepneked. Black e mo black e mo". (Morrison, 1970, p.55). Even her classmates see her skin darker than their skin and too ugly to accept. With both her teachers and classmates being so cold to her, it is inevitable that Pecola would feel alone and isolated. At the same time, Maureen who is the new comer to the school is very popular because she has the lightest skin of the colored people. All the teachers and the pupils treat her kindly not like Pecola. They all wished to speak with her; the blacks and whites pupils respect her not like the ugly Pecola. The reason for this treatment is because Maureen is the whitest of the colored pupils and with a lot of money.

When Maureen and Mac Teer sisters walk together and they get into an argument Maureen yells from across the street saying: "I am cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly e mos. I am cute". (Morrison, 1970, p. 61). It seems that as if "black e mo" is the worst name you could be called. It is an insult based on the children's degree of blackness. Being black e mo is the most degrading thing in this community. Maureen acquires the impression that being black means never being beautiful and admired.

Mr. Yocobowski, the white shopkeeper refuses to waste effort of a glance at her. He takes the three pennies from Pecola and he is aware that his hand does not touch her hand while he gives her the Mary Jane candies she wants. So many other examples of black race hatred cases can be mentioned to illustrate the fact. However, I prefer gliding to *Sula* which bears the stigma of discrimination too.

Like most of Toni Morrison's novels, *Sula* studies the ways that black people struggle to live in America, a country with a notorious history of persecuting and oppressing black people. Black characters in the novel face the weight of a history in which white Americans have consistently swindled blacks out of their property and their rights by manipulating laws, social norms, and even language itself. In the city of Medallion, where the novel is set, Afro-Americans have traditionally been confined to the Bottom-ironically the area with the highest altitude, and the least desirable neighborhood of the city. Whites promised blacks land on the "bottom" - meaning, seemingly land that was close to the Ohio River - then backed out of their promise by giving away land in the hills, supposedly the "bottom" of heaven. By the end of the book, it's clear that whites have been systematically denying blacks in the Bottom their health care and heating, by always saying that the extra resources will be used to pay for a supposed New River Road. The road construction is not open to the black manpower. As a

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chains or placed in positions of trust, resided in their owners' homes or were apprenticed or rented out. They are attested in every part of the Empire. Freed slaves were active in a similarly wide range of occupations, and in addition rose into the most senior echelons of private and public administration'.

matter of fact, in hope of being employed in road building, Jude Crane repeatedly goes to the job site looking for work. He is never selected because of his race. Morrison describes the episode, she explains that ' It was after he stood in lines for six days running and saw the gang boss pick out thin-armed white boys from the Virginia hills and the bull-necked Greeks and Italians and heard over and over, "Nothing else today. Come back tomorrow," that he got the message'. (Morrison, 1973, p.82)

In *Song of Solomon* (1977) racism is noticeable from the very beginning of the novel. The fierce racism remains as a backdrop throughout the novel. One day, Freddie tells Milkman about his bad situation and how he is a victim of racism. He explains why he was raised in jail: "You know they ain't even got an orphanage in Jacksonville where colored babies can go? They have to put' em in jail. (Morrison, 1977, p.109). Adequate facilities for blacks are not available. A member of the Seven Days enumerates the material items and the luxury lifestyle that are inaccessible to blacks: "no private coach... no special toilet and your own special-made eight- foot bed either. And... no valet and a cook and a secretary to travel with you and do everything you say. "(Morrison, 1977, p.60) Society maintains the cultural practice of separation. The novel depicts the struggle of black's culture in white society, depicting discrimination as well as separation. When Ruth Dead goes to the Mercy Hospital, on Main Avenue, Milkman becomes the first black to be born there. The Southside residents playfully call Mercy Hospital, No Mercy Hospital.

The black community like to Call Main Avenue Street as Not Doctor Street, because when Ruth's father, Dr. Foster received his patients there, he had referred to it as Doctor Street. But the whites in their concern for separation and propriety decree that "Doctor Street was never used in any official capacity" and they decide that the street" would always be known as Main Avenue and not Doctor Street".(Morrison, 1977, p.4) So they create a lasting nickname by referring to it as Not Doctor Street. The black community establishes "a way to keep their memories alive and please the city legislator as well" (4).

In *Beloved* (1987), Toni Morrison depicts her novel with the sense of alienation of blacks due to the bitter race discrimination prevailing with blacks in the American society. It moves around the alienated position of all black slaves. Sethe, the protagonist of the novel, reveals clearly about the long rooted brutality of whites over the blacks. Sethe is physically and emotionally alienated from her husband Halle, from her children, from her mother and, from her society and most vitally from herself. Her husband is separated from her when they run away from the Sweet Home. She has to kill her eldest daughter and

make her physically distant from her because of the brutality of slavery.

Illustrations can flourish as long as we continue opening other novels written by Toni Morrison. She is confined in the very circle of slavery coupled with racism because she is an African American and therefore more concerned with this situation. In this frame, and as a talented writer and Nobel Prize winner, she has the duty to shed light on the past of her community not in terms of revenge or with a belligerent attitude; the truth deserves to be known throughout generations. Story telling is the best and the most usual way to transmit knowledge in Africa, the same tool is used for the same outcome in the African American communities but with the writing techniques Toni Morrison champions in. In the same perspective, Toni Morrison happens to get down to the very beginning of slavery in America just to compare what happened and what is commonly known today. This adventure drags her to the birth of the American colonies because the first successful settlement of the British colony in the New World took place in 1607 and the first group of Blacks appeared in America in 1619. *A Mercy* is set in 1690 on D'Ortega's plantation in Maryland. From there on, a new experience of slavery is excavated by Toni Morrison to be compared with what is commonly known so far.

### **Slavery system as described in *A Mercy***

With the publication of her ninth novel, *A Mercy*, in the year 2008, Toni Morrison has the courage to plunge into the infinitely vast and nebulous origin of slavery and human servitude. In most of her previous novels she explored the diabolical impact of racism on both the white and the black American population. However, in *A Mercy*, Morrison goes beyond the evident visible aspects of slavery and its impacts in America in order to dig out a world where slavery exists without being racialized. In her fiction, Toni Morrison portrays the evolution of slavery in order to provide the readers with an opportunity to understand the facts behind racialized slavery. This novel also brings to the forefront a social milieu, where the tag of racial inferiority has not been imposed on the black population. Slavery in this novel is portrayed as a universal phenomenon that had been present in one form or the other in almost all the regions of the world. Both the whites and the colored races were equally subjected to human bondage. Set in the early stages of the slave trade, *A Mercy* gives voice to a remarkable group of characters: Jacob, an Anglo-Dutch farmer, trader, and lender; his wife, Rebekka, newly arrived from England; their servant woman, the Native American Lina, whose tribe has been wiped out by

smallpox; Florens, the slave girl Jacob reluctantly accepts as payment for a bad loan; and the permanently shipwrecked Sorrow, daughter of a sea captain killed in a storm off the coast of the Carolinas. These characters take turns narrating the story, and their voices carry the physical and emotional scars of the struggles of their lives. These are voices that have not been heard before, voices silenced first by cruelty and then by history.

In a nutshell, in what European colonizers called the Americas, or the region of New England there were innumerable slaves and indentured servants, serving their despotic masters and plantation owners in vast sugar cane, tobacco, rice and other plantations. As informed by Audrey Fisch in the chronological history of slavery, the Spanish inaugurated the importation of African slaves into the Caribbean region in 1510. In the early seventeenth-century, "A Dutch ship sells twenty slaves kidnapped from Africa to the English settlers at Jamestown, Virginia, establishing slavery in the New World" (Fisch xiii). Slavery is an ancient institution and many scholars and historians have investigated it and have examined the ways in which it affected both the ancient and the modern societies. In this respect P.J. Schwarz (1996) observes:

Numerous ancient and modern slave societies were based on chattel slavery - the legal ownership of human beings, not just their labor. . . . Throughout history, there were slaves in African, Middle Eastern, South Asian, and East Asian societies, as well as in the Americas - and of course, there were slaves in European countries. (p.5)

This universal side of slavery appears in *A Mercy* and can be referred to as a type of revolution or maturity of the writer. As P.J. Schwarz (1996) further explains that, "In early to mid-17th-century colonial North America, slavery developed slowly, beginning in Maryland and Virginia and spreading to the Carolinas in the 1670s. Southern colonists originally relied on white European servants" (pp.6-7). The European indentured servants, who worked on contractual terms under their masters, were allowed to leave after the completion of their term of service. The slaves, who were black or colored, were not allowed to leave their service even after the completion of their term. They were marketed as a commodity and were deprived of their basic rights. Tobacco, sugar and rice plantations grew rapidly during those days in America because massive workforce was available from the African and the Caribbean colonies. Thus, slavery established a strong foothold in America by the mid-seventeenth-century.

In *A Mercy*, Morrison revisits the era of early slavery

and examines the way in which slavery was racialized. Though she is a contemporary author, yet she comprehends the importance of visiting the past in order to comprehend the nature of pre-racist servitude.

### Slavery and Slave Treatment in *A Mercy*

The Middle Passage in *A Mercy* according to Florens' mother as she narrates it in the last chapter of the novel is the harsh life of slaves from their captivity and their voyage across the Atlantic Ocean. This voyage known as the middle passage is not to be experienced because it is inhuman. Morrison has described it in the following words:

Everything heats up and finally the men of their families burn we houses and collect those they cannot kill or find for trade. Bound with vine one to another we are moved four times, each time more trading, more culling, more dying. We increase in number or we decrease in number until maybe seven times ten or ten times ten of we are driven into a holding pen. There we see men we believe are ill or dead. We soon learn they are neither. Their skin was confusing. The men guarding we and selling we are black. Two have hats and strange pieces of cloth at their throats. They assure we that the whitened men do not want to eat we. Still it is the continue of all misery. Sometimes we sang. Some of we fought. Mostly we slept or wept. Then the whitened men divided we and placed we in canoes. We come to a house made to float on the sea. Each water, river or sea, has sharks under. (Morrison, 2008, pp. 163-164)

Captives are chained and shackled. As many as 30 men would sit in an 8-square-foot cell with only a small slit of window facing outward. Once a day, they were fed and allowed to attend to their needs, but still the house was overrun with diseases. Those who refuse to eat are strangled and thrown to the whirling sharks. They are naked, except for a piece of cloth around their waists. They are put in a long narrow cell used for them to lie on the floor, one against the other. The children are separated from their mothers. The mothers are across the courtyard, likely unable to hear their children cry. Rebellious Africans are locked up in an oppressive, small cubicle under the stairs; while seawater is sipped through the holes to step up dehydration. In such conditions, some captives jump overboard into the sea, death is preferable in such conditions. Toni Morrison describes it:

I welcomed the circling sharks but they avoided me as if knowing I preferred their teeth to the chains around my neck my waist my ankles. When the canoe heeled, some of we jumped, others were pulled under and we did not see their blood swirl until we alive ones were retrieved and placed under guard. (Morrison, 2008, p.164)

What is important to mention here is the philosophy behind this type of shipment. It was not limited to Blacks. People are sent to the New World because they are a threat for the others, or a solution for their problems. Rebekka is not an African or a black lady. She was born in England, where she has lived with her devotedly religious but cold and unloving parents. In England, Rebekka has begun a training program to become a domestic servant, but dropped out because the head of the program is sexually harassing her. Rebekka's father has sent her to marry Jacob in order to relieve him of the burden of paying for her upkeep. An Anglo-Dutch trader by profession, a lender and a farmer, Jacob Vaark never wants a farm, but he is pleasantly surprised when a distant uncle has left him a plot of land. Suddenly wanting roots, Jacob has paid for Rebekah's passage and has married her, straight off the ship that has brought her across the ocean. The bargain goes on the following way:

Already sixteen, she knew her father would have shipped her off to anyone who would book her passage and relieve him of feeding her. A waterman, he was privy to all sorts of news from colleagues, and when a crewman passed along an inquiry from a first mate—a search for a healthy, chaste wife willing to travel abroad—he was quick to offer his eldest girl. The stubborn one, the one with too many questions and a rebellious mouth. Rebekka's mother objected to the "sale"—she called it that because the prospective groom had stressed "reimbursement" for clothing, expenses and a few supplies—not for love or need of her daughter, but because the husband-to be was a heathen living among savages. (Morrison, 2008, p.74)

Rebekah's father is a British citizen, he has sent her to the New World just to get rid of her because he does not love her and he faces some financial problems. In fact, Rebekah is always curious about everything and is eager to ask questions to know more. Her father never likes that. He offers her to an unknown man to take her away.

### Slaves life in the New World

Living conditions in the New World are not attractive because of the hegemony of the gentry employing servants but racial segregation was not a part of the game. The slaves in *A Mercy* are more productive in assisting the White supremacy system. They do everything ordered by their white master even if it is extremely hard to be done. However white people do not fear them even if they are rebellious. The gentry's supremacy on the slaves is shown in the novel when Florens is in her errand to search for the blacksmith. She is at a Widow's house where she stays for a night but has become the source of curiosity. Morrison describes the scene:

The Widow waves both hands saying she is a guest seeking shelter from the night. We accept her how could we not and feed her. Which night the man asks. This one past she answers. One woman speaks saying I have never seen any human this black. I have says another, this one is as black as others I have seen. She is Afric. Afric and much more, says another. Just look at this child says the first woman. She points to the little girl shaking and moaning by her side. Hear her. Hear her. It is true then says another. The Black Man is among us. This is his minion. (Morrison, 2008, p. 111)

The widow has offered her a shelter and food out of moral obligation. Nobody considers first her skin complexion. Indeed, Florens is seen by some white men as something horrific or dreadful and they think she is the one that carries diseases to the village. From the way the white man points at Florens with his stick and how the little girl gets scared of her because her skin is black, as if Florens is not human. Her being different and colored is something unnatural, and for the white people it is something related to demon. In the 17th century America, people believed in superstition and easily suspected independent women of being witches.

The Widow's family thinks that she is running away but fortunately her Mistress has given her a letter as a pass that allows her to continue her way:

The signatory of this letter, Mistress Rebekka Vaark of Milton vouches for the female person into whose hands it has been placed. She is owned by me and can be known by burne mark in the palm of her left hand. Allow her the courtesie of safe passage and witherall she may need to complete her errand. Our life, my life, on this earth depends on her speedy

return. Signed Rebekka Vaark, Mistress,  
Milton 18 May 1690 (Morrison, 2008, p. 112)

The letter is the very proof that she is not illegal and that her journey is not running away, but a task she needs to complete for her mistress. Without the letter or any legal declaration, she will be easily arrested. Nevertheless, even when Florens has shown the letter to white people to know who she is, she still has to get undressed for the white people to check her body every inch. As if not satisfied to find her without flaws, they still stare at her and think that she is a little devil: "A woman's voice asks would satan write a letter. Lucifer is all deceit and trickery says another says another" (Morrison, 2008, p. 113). People want to be convinced about her being a human because they are afraid of the presence of a phantom. Let's notice that Florens is going without shackles because her mistress is sure she cannot run away. Florens is concerned with the health of Rebekka Vaark, her mistress. This environment shaped here is free of hatred and a slave is happy to serve his owner.

Another aspect to raise here concerns the Blacksmith who is a freed black man. He has come to the Vaarks' farm to make an iron fence and gate for Jacob's new, fancy house. Rebekka sends Florens to him when she falls ill and he has healed her. Rebekka is white and the Blacksmith is black, however they happen to cooperate easily. Toni Morrison has even valued the black folk through the Blacksmith. The latter is alone to be able to cure her disease and he is sent for. Rebekka has recovered. Without his action Rebekka could die like her husband. Morrison has presented America as a world of wilderness where solidarity and complementarity work to secure life and survival.

Another facet of slavery in America in the 1680s regards the indentured servants. The slaves and indentured servants working in the plantations during those days experienced a similar sort of discrimination based on class and sex. In *A Mercy*, Morrison mentions some of them with a critical view. As a matter of fact, two European indentured servants called Willard Bond and Scully are exploited and maintained in bondage through tricks. Morrison explains:

Sold for seven years to a Virginia planter, young Willard Bond expected to be freed at age twenty-one. But three years were added onto his term for infractions— theft and assault—and he was re-released to a wheat farmer far up north. ....Theft of a shoat was invented and thrown in just to increase Willard's indebtedness. (A Morrison, 2008, pp.148-149)

Both Willard and Scully are hopeless, but Scully seems more rooted in despair. They can imagine no way out, they are trapped and are unable to foresee the end of their contracts. About their case, Toni Morrison writes:

Both were Europes, after all. Willard was getting on in years and was still working off his passage. The original seven years stretched to twenty-some, he said, and he had long ago forgotten most of the mischief that kept extending his bondage. The ones he remembered with a smile involved rum; the others were attempts to run away. Scully, young, fine-boned, with light scars tracing his back, had plans. He was finishing his mother's contract. True, he didn't know how long it would take but, he boasted, unlike Willard's or Lina's, his enslavement would end before death. (Morrison, 2008, p.57)

In short, Willard and Scully are Vaark's European indentured servants. They are homosexual characters and are living the injustice that characterizes slavery in this part of the world where immigrants from Europe have discovered new opportunities to solve their social, economic and religious problems. So the New World is like a monster that swallows anyone that ventures in and squeezes his or her last energy before dropping the carcass. Females are also submitted to damage, decay and trauma.

Florens and her mother initially belong to D'Ortega, a Portuguese slave owner, who owes money to Jacob, a tradesman. Jacob goes to D'Ortega's plantation to receive his payment, but "it became clear what D'Ortega had left to offer. Slaves" (Morrison, 2008, p.21). D'Ortega insists that Jacob should take a slave as payment, but Jacob is hesitant because slaves are not goods he trades in. But near the house, Florens's mother catches Jacob's attention: "He saw a woman standing in the doorway with two children. One on her hip; one hiding behind her skirts. She looked healthy enough, better fed than the others. On a whim, mostly to silence him and fairly sure D'Ortega would refuse, he said, 'Her. That one. I'll take her'" (Morrison, 2008, pp. 23-24). Jacob describes Florens's mother, who is a house slave quite valuable to D'Ortega. He answers: "Ah, no. Impossible. My wife won't allow. She can't live without her". (Morrison, 2008, p.24) Jacob perceives from his reaction that "there was more than cooking D'Ortega stood to lose" (Morrison, 2008, p. 24). It is implied that Florens's mother is abused by D'Ortega and, for that reason; she is kept around the house. Although D'Ortega says his wife cannot live without her, it is he that wants her close. Interrupting the conversation between both male characters, the

narrator describes the scene of Florens and her mother by saying this:

The little girl stepped from behind the mother. On her feet was a pair of way-too-big woman's shoes... The woman cradling the small boy on her hip came forward. Her voice was barely above a whisper but there was no mistaking its urgency. "Please, Senhor. Not me. Take her. Take my daughter. (Morrison, 2008, p.26).

In an act that surprises Jacob, the woman offers her own daughter to be taken away. Because of this event, Jacob misinterprets Florens's mother's actions, describing Florens as the: "ill-shod child that the mother was throwing away" (Morrison, 2008, p.34). Like his peers, he has a distorted view of motherhood that sees black mothers as cruel and detached. This assumption benefits Jacob, because it releases him of any guilt for his action of buying a young girl and, thus, depriving the little girl of her mother's company. Florens's mother is judged through the lenses of a white male who fails to understand the reality of black women during slavery. He conveniently portrays Florens's mother as monstrous and convinces himself that he is doing Florens a favor by taking her away from this unnatural mother. Jacob thinks to himself that the "acquisition [of Florens]... could be seen as a rescue" (Morrison, 2008, p. 34), insisting on the fact that he saved Florens from a mother who rejected her.

However, later in the novel, Florens's mother has the chance to tell her story and shed light on her actions. This is possible because she narrates the last chapter herself. She tells the story from her viewpoint as if speaking directly to her daughter: "you [Florens] wanted the shoes of a loose woman, and a cloth around your chest did no good. You caught Senhor's eye" (Morrison, 2008, p. 166). Despite Florens's mother's attempts to keep her as a child as long as possible, she is worried because D'Ortega started to notice her daughter. She knows that if Florens stays, she is doomed to have the same fate as herself: to be abused and to serve the sexual needs of her white master. She continues to explain her actions: "One chance, I thought. There is no protection but there is difference" (Morrison, 2008, p.166). Florens's mother is aware that there are no guarantees for slaves, but she knows that there are different kinds of oppression and abuse. She asks Jacob Vaark to take her child because she believes he would treat her as a child, not as a sexual possession. She takes whatever action available to prevent her daughter's rape by D'Ortega. Florens's mother has very limited choices, but she fights to save her children. She describes the same scene of the encounter with Jacob, but from her own point of view by declaring in the following words:

You stood there in those shoes and the tall man laughed and said he would take me to close the debt. I knew Senhor would not allow it. I said you. Take you, my 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. It was not a miracle. Bestowed by God. It was a mercy. Offered by a human. I stayed on my knees. (Morrison, 2008, pp. 166-167)

Florens's mother sees in Jacob the only chance for Florens to escape from D'Ortega. As a mother, she tries to secure a better future for her daughter - a future with hopes that Florens will escape at least - the cruelty of sexual abuse. She experiences the dilemma many mothers faced in slavery. Florens's mother refuses the role of helpless victim and takes whatever action available to help her children live.

Morrison presents two slave mothers in different novels who sacrifice their daughters due to the atrocities of the system but the contexts are different. Sethe in *Beloved* kills her own daughter to protect her from falling prey to racism, whereas Florens's mother abandons her own daughter in order to save her from the tyranny of her lewd and exploitative master. Though Florens can hardly overcome the pain of this separation and betrayal, she learns that it was an act of maternal devotion on part of her mother, who had very limited choices to protect her daughter. The mother in *A Mercy* saves her daughter by abandoning her instead of killing her.

### **Analysis of Toni Morrison's perspective**

In the 17th century America, slavery and racism were not bound together. There are white orphan, Indian woman, free black and white indenture servants in this novel. By putting them together on a farm, Morrison explored the living conditions of different people, and revealed the essence of slavery.

Four women living in the farm have various fates, but to some extent they are all enslaved and deprived of freedom. They cannot choose their destiny and social position. Just like what Lina said: "We never shape the world she says. The world shapes us." (Morrison, 2008, p.71). Messalina is the first woman bought by Jacob to the farm. Her name is shortened to become Lina. She is not a black woman, but an Indian native. Smallpox has exterminated her tribe. She works in the home of white owners and is named Lina, which means "a sliver of hope." (Morrison, 2008, p.47). She has no origin and tries her best to serve her owner in order not to be alone and homeless. She strengthens herself by religion and pieced belief.

Rebekka is the mailed bride of Jacob from Britain. Her



parents marry her to Jacob just because they want to get rid of her. Rebekka does not expect too much to marry a stranger far away from her home. On her ship to America, she thinks "her prospects were servant, prostitute, wife, and although horrible stories were told about each of those careers, the last one seemed safest." (Morrison, 2008, pp.77-78). But her marriage is beyond her expectation; Jacob is kind to her and calls her "my northern star". They are just like two trees. "They leaned on each other root and crown." (Morrison, 2008, p.87). But their four children die one by one, and followed by the death of Jacob. The death of her husband leaves her rootless, nothing to lean against, to rely on. Without husband, Rebekka cannot live alone, she returns to religion to gain relief. She is cruel to her servants because she thinks her husband has rejected her. "Refusing to enter the grand house, the one in whose construction she had delighted, seemed to him a punishment not only of herself but of everyone, her dead husband in particular." (Morrison, 2008, p.153). She suffers spiritual slavery and hurt people surrounding her.

*A Mercy* is a visceral, intricately textured novel that takes readers right to the origins of America, a place where the seeds of the racial, religious, and class tensions that would later come to fruition in revolution and civil war were already being sown. It is a place where people are forced to make wrenching decisions. Jacob does not wish to take a slave as payment for a bad debt, but he feels it is the best option available. Nor does he wish to traffic in slavery, he prides himself on his honest work though he is willing to make huge profits off the slave labor of sugar plantations in Barbados. Florens's mother does not want to part with her daughter, but feels that Florens will be better off with Jacob than with her own cruel master. Rebekka knows that even as a white woman, the only choices open to her are wife, servant, and prostitute. Florens, Lina, and Sorrow, who are

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servants, know that if both their master and mistress die, their already circumscribed choices will disappear completely and they will be fair game for anyone. This is a world in which women, white, black, and Native American are especially vulnerable, literally at the mercy of the men who hold power over them. It is a world without racial separation where live the gentry and their multiracial servants.

## CONCLUSION

In this novel, Morrison brings together representatives of all the major racial categories in the New World African, Native American, Anglo and mulatto. It is a historical fact that slavery was not confined to any particular race. Slavery in ancient times was not race-oriented because slaves were not enslaved on the basis of color. Before 1500, slavery was not based on skin color in Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Asia, or the Americas. Most slaves were prisoners of war or sold into slavery as a punishment for a crime. It made no difference to the buyers or sellers if the slaves had light or dark skin. Black people were identified through a mere accident. They proved more resistant to hard work than the Indians who 'perished under the ordeal like sheep'. Shufeldt (1907, 50) In this process, the Europeans encouraged the discrimination based on skin color, which finally transformed into racism. Skin color was deliberately connected to slavery in order to acquire a greater number of slaves for creating a massive workforce.

Slavery in America in the very beginning of the settlement of Europeans was neutral and aimed at buying people for the need of workforce. Toni Morrison has worked to uncover the phenomenon in order to locate the origin of racism in America. In short, America was not born with racism, but racism has come later as an institution, a philosophy to show the supremacy of a group over other groups in the same society.

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