

Chapter Two

Black Trade

If You Are White, You Are All Right; If You Are Brown, You Can Stick Around; But If You Are Black... Get Back.

- Calvin C. Hernton

Trade is a simple economic model that involves several parties participating in the voluntary negotiation and then the exchange of one's goods and services for preferred goods and services that someone else possesses. Trade is an imperative social bustle because the society needs an incessant supply of goods for the cumulative and ever changing but never ending human wants. In prehistoric times, to trade or barter for goods and services was the lifeblood at the origin of communication. This was considered to be around approximately 150,000 years ago. Throughout much of recorded history, trading is believed to have taken place. This fact is supported by the exchange of obsidian and flint during the Stone Age.

All the European nations had an eye on the African sub-continent as it was considered rich and affluent because of the resources it had and the wealth it possessed in terms of gold. They tried all possible ways of getting the resources out of the continent. It was very much possible that Africa's economic and social development before 1500 may have been ahead of Europe's. The great empires of West Africa, Ghana, Mali and Songhay had huge resources of gold. This provoked the special interest of Europeans for West Africa. Gold provided the capitals for the economic take-off of Europe in the 13th and 14th centuries. In the 14th century, the West African empire of Mali was bigger than Western Europe and believed to be one of the richest

and most powerful states in the world. It was the Portuguese who first arrived in Mali. By 1471, under the patronage of Prince Henry the Navigator, they had reached the area that was to become known as the Gold Coast because Europeans knew the area as the source of gold that reached Muslim North Africa by way of trade routes across the Sahara. The interest in trading for gold, ivory, and pepper increased so much that in 1482, the Portuguese built their first permanent trading post on the western coast of present-day Ghana. Elmina Castle is the name of this fortress that is constructed to protect Portuguese trade from European competitors and hostile Africans. The fortress still stands on the western coast.

The opening of European plantations in the New World during the 1500s suddenly expanded the demand for laborers in America. Africans were looked upon as cheap laborers and were forcibly imported and made as slave workers. Trade in slaves soon surpassed gold as the principal export of the west coast of Africa. Undeniably, Africa became the primary source of slaves for the New World. The apparently ravenous market and the considerable profits gained from the slave trade attracted explorers from all over Europe. A lot of conflict arose among European groups on the coast and among hostile African kingdoms as a result of competition for control of this trade.

Trade was healthy and imperative for the civilized humankind until it involved human beings as commodities. Between 1500 and 1900, Europeans were successful in forcibly uprooting millions of people from West Africa and West Central Africa. The Africans were shipped across the Atlantic amidst grave conditions of cruelty. To refer to the Africans, who were imprisoned as “slaves” have stripped them of their identity. They were, for instance, farmers, merchants, priests, soldiers, goldsmiths and

musicians. They were husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, sons and daughters. They could be Yoruba, Igbo, Akan or Kongolese.

Black trade, therefore, could be said to be the most inhuman incident in the history of humankind and was the largest forced migration in history. It started in the fifteenth century. The extensive exodus of Africans spread to many areas of the world over a four-hundred year period was exceptional in the accounts of chronicled human history. The trade was triangular. The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade was initiated by the Portuguese. This trade involved the transportation, sale and exploitation of millions of Africans from the fifteenth century to the nineteenth century. The triangular trade as it was also called, and its middle passage, ultimately took place on four continents, lasted for four centuries and accounted for the extermination of hundreds of millions of Africans as well as other native people of the Caribbean, the Americas and the Far East.

The Afro- American experience began when colonists bought twenty “Negars” from a “Dutch Man of Warre” that landed its human cargo in Jamestown, Virginia, in August 1619 (Joe 58). From then on, “the planters bought slaves as rapidly as traders made them available” (Edmund 106). Slave trade was the beginning of the institution of slavery in America. In addition, racism followed slavery. Richard Gray quotes Walter Rodney in *The Cambridge History of Africa* as Rodney says,

Above all, it was the institution of slavery in the Americas, which ultimately conditioned racial attitudes, even when their more immediate derivation was the literature on Africa or contacts within Europe itself. It has been well attested that New World slave-plantation society was the laboratory of modern racism. The owners contempt for and fear of the black slaves was expressed in religious, scientific and philosophical

terms, which became the stock attitudes of European and even Africans in subsequent generations. Although there have been contributions to racist philosophy both before and after the slave trade epoch, the historical experience of whites enslaving blacks for four centuries forged the tie between racist and colour prejudice, and produced not merely individual racists but a society where racism was so all-pervasive that it was not even perceived as what it actually was. The very concept of human racial variants was never satisfactorily established in biological terms, and the assumptions of scientists and laymen alike were rooted in the perception of a reality in which Europeans had succeeded in reducing Africans to the level of chattel. (qtd. in Gray, Richard 590)

In *A Mercy* (2008), Toni Morrison returns to the past, exploring slavery, exploitation, persecution, ambition, and loss in the 1680s and 1690s. The time is well before the earliest days of her Pulitzer Prize -winning *Beloved*. Rooted in the days before slavery became identical, primarily in Africa, the pre-revolutionary New World is already torn by religious, national, and class differences. The particular strength of *A Mercy* lies in its scope. There is black experience of slavery in *Beloved*. There is strident feminism in *Paradise*. The more modern Afro-American experience and struggle for place and meaning is seen in *Tar Baby* and *Song of Solomon*. *A Mercy* is Morrison's slim yet tightly condensed new novel. The novel encompasses a variety of voices from different backgrounds, colors, and nationalities, linked mainly by the common experience of repression, exploitation, and enslavement at the hands of the early New World settlers. In a review in *Ebony*, the reviewer comments, "*A Mercy* takes on slavery in its infancy and reveals what lies beneath the surface. It's an

ambivalent and disturbing story, sparingly written, including rejection, abandonment and acts of mercy with unforeseen consequences” (56).

Morrison's *A Mercy* is the story of a young slave girl named Florens. The novel gives an account of the history of early colonial modernism through a set of characters whose narration portrays various kinds of expropriation of blacks, Native Americans and whites. The novel is concerned with the beginnings of slavery. Morrison uses her much admired verdant prose to enlighten the readers of a murky and opaque time in history of the 1680's. The story is set in 17th century America at the beginning of the institutionalization of slavery. Here, Morrison focuses on the havoc of slavery both physical and emotional that plagued that time in America. Particularly, Morrison writes about the complications that came up as a result of slavery. In *A Mercy*, Morrison brings in characters to represent all the major racial groups in the New World, notably the African, Native American, Anglo, and Mulatto. The novel also features white and Native American characters who are employed in bondage.

The tense relationships between mother and daughter, the imprecise lines of community ties and the role of the individual in carving the script of other's lives are the problems of slavery in this novel. In exploring the arcane concept of slavery, Morrison unearths a promising hope for those who faced with unspeakable horrors. The complexity with which Morrison crafts the novel ultimately offers a nuanced account of mercy that pulls the reader to the shores of meaning and existence while providing societal commentary. In effect, Morrison presents the reader with her own perspective of the world, which brings the reader to question crystallized dogmas. Although it is set in a period of the past centuries, *A Mercy* presents an incisive look into present-day life.

The motherhood subject in *A Mercy* works to fuel the portrayal of major characters, initiate conflict, emphasize motifs, and present major themes.

The America that Morrison depicts in the novel *A Mercy* is a land that is jittery and repressive, fixated on profit and penalizing by instinct. Definitely, it is not a land hungry for freedom. It is fate and economy that brings the characters together, and holds them together. However, the characters struggle when being together and they manage only to the point, until it takes to recognize common victimhood. The orphans and waifs of Jacob's farm are a community that has a tendency to disintegrate as soon as he is dead. Any affective bonds they have formed are weak compared to the imperatives of finding a new way to survive. Rather than a single coherent story, *A Mercy* is a collage of pre-revolutionary America, where far more people are conscripts or orphans than are heroes, pilgrims or pioneers. Amy Frykholm says,

A Mercy is a meditation on the nature of slavery and freedom, on where we came from and who we are. Morrison writes about a moment when racial identity had yet to solidify and polarize into black and white, and she uses this moment to transform slavery from a historical problem into a question about human nature. Slavery, in this novel, has both external and internal components. It isn't merely a legal status; it is also a way of encountering the world. The trader, for example, should be the most free of the characters in the book because he is a European man who can own property and other humans. But he is enslaved to an idea of prosperity that costs him his life. (46)

A Mercy (AM) is a story of a good mother, who prefers to send away her young enslaved daughter, with the expectation of preventing her daughter from getting

vandalized in slavery. The title of the novel is remarkable and ambiguous since life does not have mercy on any of the characters involved. However, it is not satirical since at the end of the book Florens's fate in Vaark's household becomes a mercy for her as much as she has been for other female characters. In the beginning of the novel, Florens, the young girl is traded. Her owner gives her away in return for his debt. Minha mae, mother of Florens, is working in a tobacco plantation owned by D'Ortega. D'Ortega has initially been to Angola and stayed there for four years. It is Angola, where the Portuguese are extremely cruel to their slaves. D'Ortega has learnt and imbibed the qualities from the Portuguese and he is extremely cruel to his slaves in his plantation. D'Ortega has fallen on difficult times and owed a debt to another trader, Jacob Vaark.

Minhae mae wants to prevent Florens from being sexually abused. There is a high chance that her daughter may be ruined in her present location. D'Ortega offers one of his slaves as a partial payment to Vaark, as he could not clear off his debt; Minha mae prays that her daughter should be taken away. Slaves are traded in such ways easily. Minhae mae wants Florens to be sent off as she comes to know Vaark is a lot better than her master. Minha mae says, "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" (*AM* 164).

However, Florens perceives her mother's choice as an emotional and physical abandonment. She could not acknowledge the reason for this choice and she internalizes everything and eventually erupts into more violence later. In the first chapter of *A Mercy*, Florens is around seven or eight and she misinterprets her mother's

reasoning in sending her away with a new owner as payment of a debt. Florens later remembers the incident, with childlike sadness,

forever and ever. Me watching, my mother listening, her baby boy on her hip. Senhor is not paying the whole amount he owes to Sir. 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 (AM 5).

The betrayal and pain Florens feels is evident in her version as she repeats “Me. Me. . . forever and ever.” Moreover, she cannot believe her mother has just given her away to be separated forever from her. Certainly, neither mother nor daughter is free in slavery. Therefore, the mother actually has no option. She simply begs to provide for both children. Unfortunately, the young Florens understands the situation as her mother choosing a baby brother over the elder daughter. Florens speaks out her budding discernment of the situation by saying that “mothers nursing greedy babies scare me. I know how their eyes go when they choose. . . . holding the little boy’s hand” (AM 6). Instead of realizing the great sacrifice her mother has just made for her daughter, Florens only understands her own abandonment and this shapes her entire future. Slavery not only vetoed formation of families, but it also made stable, secure family life impossible. Brenda E. Stevenson in her book, *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South*, mentions that, the “legacy of involuntary exodus was overwhelmingly destructive to their marriages, kin groups, and communities... The constant withdrawal of family members (especially men) from slave families damaged and sometimes destroyed slave marriages and families” (Stevenson viii).

Slave owners routinely detached black family members from each other by sale. This continual separation denied slaves the ability to function as families. It prevented them from sharing the responsibilities of households and children and providing each other with intimacy and love. Here, “the sale of humanity” respects no nationality, extending itself to European and Native American as well as black, to indentured servants as well as kidnapped Africans. The practice of indentured servitude virtually enslaves the workers, often for the length of their lives and even their children’s lives, as corrupt practices and practitioners add years onto the sentences of individuals with no power to fight back. Class differences led to people’s wars that in turn led to lawless laws encouraging meanness in exchange for common cause, if not common virtue, allowing the subjugation of all people of color or difference and forever eliminating any hope of co-operation between laborers. In addition, religious differences have spawn distrust and resentment at best, and abandonment, humiliating inspections of accusations of demonic possession, and persecution at worst.

Minha mae values her daughter more than herself and she saves her child from potential sexual abuse. Minha mae’s decision depicts the amount of sacrifice a mother is willing to make to ensure the survival of her child. Minha mae’s loss is deliberate and planned. Minha mae’s abandonment of Florens is intentional self-injury for the benefit of the child. The truth of the situation is that the sacrifice is imperative and has to be made to avert the impending suffering. However, the outcome of the separation, negatively affects the girl throughout her life, inflicting havoc on the child’s self-esteem and her ability to nurture any other relationship successful. Floren’s mother tries to save her daughter from the clutches of brutal slavery. She thinks separation is much better than going through devastating slavery. She causes Florens a significant alternative pain with her abandonment. In a way, this act of Minha mae is similar to

that of the infanticide done by Sethe in the novel *Beloved*. In this case, Florens's mother shows a similarity to other enslaved mothers. As Bell Hooks (1990) explains, "In the midst of a brutal racist system, which did not value black life, [the slave mother] valued the life of her child enough to resist that system" (44). Florens's mother goes to great strides to give her children the best opportunity available.

Frederick Douglass (1818 - 1895) was an Afro-American social reformer, abolitionist, orator, writer, and statesman. He escaped from slavery and became a leader of the Abolitionist Movement. Douglass was readily accepted and he became notable for his appealing eloquence and powerful antislavery writings. He proved as a counter-model to slaveholders' opinions that slaves lacked the intellectual ability to function as independent American citizens. The male black feminist Fredrick Douglass says about the story of his birth in his slave narrative. He talks about his mother in the beginning and describes how he is separated from his mother intentionally. This was the practice the slave-owners adopted to weaken the bond between family members. They often sold them without any consideration. In Fredrick's case, his mother had to walk twelve miles to see him when he was young. She was not able to nurture him, as she would like to do if he were with her. He says,

I never saw my mother, to know her as such, more than four or five times in my life; and each of these times was very short in duration, and at night. She was hired by a Mr. Stewart, who lived about twelve miles from my home. She made her journeys to see me in the night, travelling the whole distance on foot, after the performance of her day's work. She was a field hand, and a whipping is the penalty of not being in the field at sunrise, unless a slave has special permission from his or her master

to the contrary—a permission which they seldom get, and one that gives to him that gives it the proud name of being a kind master. I do not recollect of ever seeing my mother by the light of day. She was with me in the night. She would lie down with me, and get me to sleep, but long before I waked she was gone. (3)

This is the kind of turmoil slave families faced in America. And unfortunately, the lack of explanation to Florens for her mother's actions and choices creates distrust in Florens. This distrust, she carries with her throughout the novel, ultimately ending in a violent reaction towards a child. The child is viewed as a competitor by her for no reason. Florens has a love affair with a freedman and she has a grudge to share him with an orphaned boy. This reflects the violence she has felt her whole life from her mother's act. As Florens initially meets the boy, she immediately recognizes her dilemma. She says in *AM*, "This happens twice before. The first time it is me peering around my mother's dress, hoping for a hand that is only for her little boy... Both times are full of danger and I am expelled" (*AM* 133-134). She is worried that she will be replaced or excluded, as she cannot see that her lover could love more than one person. Florens says, "I worry as the boy steps closer to you . . . As if he is your future. Not me" (*AM* 134). Assuming the boy also wants her absence, Florens narrates her understanding of him, "He is silent but the hate in his eyes is loud. He wants my leaving. This cannot happen. I feel the clutch inside. This expelled can never happen again" (*AM* 135). Finally, Florens attacks the child and shares, "And yes, I do hear the shoulder crack but the sound is small. . . . He screams screams then faints" (*AM* 137-138). The blacksmith appears at this moment and having seen the attack, he is outraged and angered. He ironically rejects Florens, not because he favors the boy, but because he has seen the violence inside her, which is bred and fostered within slavery and that

system's forcible abandonment by her mother. As Florens is not able to use violence to get what she wants, it is still a rebellious action taken against her circumstances. Florens's violent attack on the child, and then her acts on her lover later, all make sense only if one understands her mindset as the daughter sent away by her mother. Now sent away by both her mother and lover, Florens cannot make sense of the past to create a new life, even in freedom. Nonetheless, in this desperate act of violence, Florens rebels against the limitations of societal behavior, taking action and refusing to accept abandonment yet again.

The tragedy is that Florens's mother is actually trying to save her daughter, as her lover is simply being kind to an abandoned boy. However, without the crucial piece of information from her enslaved mother, Florens does not learn to navigate relationships or learn to trust. Hence, the innocent and self-martyring act of rescue from the mother becomes an act of violence, setting in motion her daughter's future brutality and ultimate self-destruction.

Florens has similar bad times during her life in the plantations of Vaark. After Vaark's death, Rebekka tries to sell Florens again. Rebekka changes a lot and she is not like before. Florens learns from Scully and Willard that she is trying to sell her. She says, "Her churchgoing alters her but I don't believe they tell her to behave that way. These rules are her own and she is not the same. Scully and Willard say she is putting me up for sale" (*AM* 157). Scully helps her and saves Florens,

... advertised the sale of Florens, he cringed inside, but said nothing. Not only because it was not his place, but also because he was determined to be quit of servitude forever, and for that, money was a guarantee. Yet, when possible and in secret, he tried to soften or erase the hurt Mistress

inflicted. He prepared a box for Sorrow's baby, lined it with sheepskin. He even tore down the advertisement posted in the village (but missed the one in the meetinghouse). (*AM* 153)

Florens's quest for freedom is the most complex. As she searches for the blacksmith, she is enslaved by her desire for him in a way that destroys the connection she has with the other women on the farm. But the blacksmith tells her that her slavery is her choice. She objects that being owned by the trader is what makes her a slave. Florens' story of abandonment, passion, and rejection shows an internal enslavement can be more powerful and destructive than the external reality. Between her and Blacksmith the conversation goes thus:

'What is your meaning? I am a slave because Sir trades for me.

No. You have become one.

How?

Your head is empty and your body is wild.

I am adoring you.

And a slave to that too.

You alone own me.

Own yourself, woman, and leave us be. . . You are nothing but wilderness. No constraint. No mind.' (*AM* 139)

Florens leads a life, which has been an anecdote of oppression and subjugation. Florens remains preoccupied with the thought of her mother's rejection and her master's unwillingness to take her. She seems to have recognized the fact that her life is hollow and nobody needs her. She has definitely misunderstood her mother. Florens, hence, remains an "other," an invisible being who fails to cross all the barriers that hinder her individuality. She expects love and comfort from the unnamed blacksmith,

turns to him only to receive rejection. Florens breaks down psychologically and emotionally and starts losing her own self. For Florens, if slavery is a hard condition to be in, finding internal freedom is still harder. Maggie Galehouse says,

A Mercy is not so much a novel about race, but a meditation on ownership and the ways in which the enslaved internalize their subordination. As romantic and sexy as Morrison's books can be, they always step beyond romance to a more primal place. Against the backdrop of a territory in the early stages of colonization, *A Mercy* charts nothing less than the colonization of the self. (9)

To start with, Minha mae is traded and taken from Africa. In the ship like other black slaves, she has to endure inhuman hardship. Minha mae's story offers a complete image of her history of expropriation, which is similar to that of other Africans. Her story reveals the carnages of the slave trade and the slave plantation and slavery's impact on the next generation. Her narration reveals how English colonizers enslaved the Africans. Being interested in land, resources and subjects for their trade and economy, colonizers invaded them unprovoked, marauding and destroying their communities to get hold of what they wanted without having to ask for their consent. This is exactly the case of Minha mae according to whom, "the men of their families burn we houses and collect those they cannot kill or find for trade" (*AM* 161). The colonizers did not hesitate to do anything to get slaves. They plundered them of their lives and snatched their well-being without having any concern for them. They promptly murdered anyone, who questioned or stopped them.

Similarly, the mother of Sethe in *Beloved* has been traded from Africa and the same is the story of Baby Suggs. Like the fate of Florens, even the children of Baby Suggs in *Beloved* are sold and traded. Baby Suggs, is able to keep only one of her eight children. Her two girls, “neither of whom had their adult teeth,” are sold and taken away before she could even wave goodbye.” Morrison says, “In all of Baby’s life... men and women were moved around like checkers... What she called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children” (*BD* 27-28). Trading blacks is just like playing checkers for the slave owners. Even if the commodity is children, they are not any exclusion for the trade. Slaves are just considered as the pieces on the checkers board. The black kings have sold their own country folks for exchange of goods from Europe. Through memory, Minha mae returns to that moment of the past when everything changed and from that point, she relates on her life. Her community is destroyed and she is sold as a “negrita” to D’ Ortega. Minha mae, in *A Mercy* is confused as she says,

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. The whitened ones guarding we like that as much as the sharks are happy to have a plentiful feeding place. (*AM* 162)

Examining the slaves with the purpose of selecting the most fitting for sale, a process known as “culling” is a devastating experience of the enslaved. Morrison says, “one by one we were made to jump high, to bend over, to open our mouths” (*AM* 163). Colonizers inspect their commodities to ensure their quality that will guarantee their sale and therefore ensuring the traders’ profit. A slave’s physical condition, strength and abilities are pivotal for it is upon these characteristics that the purchase is based. By and large slaves were treated as articles of commerce until gradually the westerners came to identify them as such believing in their natural inferiority and granting them the status of objects.

The scene of the slave ship embodies the grave atrocities faced by the expropriated. Minha mae speaks of the voyage from Africa and how she would have preferred to be eaten by sharks but the sharks would not have her. She herself “welcomed the circling sharks” because she “preferred their teeth to the chains” that enslaved her (*AM* 162). So intense is their psychological and physical torment that they wished for death. Minha mae even pretends to be dead so that she would be thrown overboard. The enslaved women and men either slept or wept all through the ruthless voyage. Dispossession, being denied identity, or worse, reduced to a lesser identity, is what all slaves had to undergo. After Minha mae and the others are raped, the men apologize and explain that they have been ordered to “break in” the women. This is the forced breeding of slaves that has been practiced by the slave owners in order to increase work force in the plantations and other areas.

Morrison in *A Mercy* brings up the ideology of feminism capitalism and colonialism. It is an era before slavery was introduced. In *A Mercy*, the author explores a time when slavery and blackness are not yet absolutely identified. In her subsequent

novels, there is slavery, suppression and black suffering. She voices profound black feminism and brings issues against racism. In *A Mercy*, while describing the character Rebekka, Morrison points out the state where women are subjugated by the patriarchal hegemony. Here, Morrison shows the status of women as men's property. Rebekka in London is thinking about the plans of her future. Rebekka remembers that as a working-class girl, "her prospects were servant, prostitute, wife, and although horrible stories were told about each of those careers, the last one seemed safest" (*AM* 75-76). By this, Morrison confronts male chauvinism and their domination on women at all levels. In fact, all the women in the novel seem to represent subalternity as they suffer in one way or the other either from the malicious and selfish men they confront with or the society they live in. Tim Adams writes, "Each of the women seems locked inside her own head, and inside her own fate. All of them are slaves in different ways" (Adams n.p). The novel, *A Mercy* is not about race, but about contemplation on ownership and the ways in which the enslaved internalize and adopt their subordination.

The novel, *A Mercy* can be read with the black feministic idea as it supports both black motherhood and sisterhood in its substance. Andrea O'Reilly in her book, *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart* strongly argues that Afro-American motherhood should be differentiated from European American motherhood (6). According to Simone De Beauvoir, the European American motherhood is viewed as restrictions and oppression for women who do not play a role in the economic, political and social life of the times (540). Afro-American motherhood is viewed as a liberating, empowering force, and a site of resistance for mothers who want to pass on their ancient wisdom and culture. In Morrison's works, motherhood and mothers' love direct the events in the novel. It is a mother's decision to give up her daughter as a

partial payment of a debt, in the beginning of the novel *A Mercy*. This decision eventually forms this girl's future and destiny. Mother's love in Morrison's work can be so strong that the mother would do what Florens's mother has done for the sake of protecting her daughter from the destiny she has to face from the oppressor's hand. She protects her from what she has been through as much as she liberates her own mind from the dominating fear and apprehension for her daughter's future. Motherhood can be considered as a means of self-definition. In doing this, Florens's mother is trying to fulfill her role in the African culture. She passes on the ancestral wisdom. If she had been unable to execute such a bold decision, she would have been considered vulnerable and would have led an empty life. An important element of this "ancestral wisdom" is the unselfish love that prefers the welfare of the beloved to one's own.

Minha mae has known that mothers are the pivots around which familial relationships are delineated and organized. She knows that her daughter's happiness should be privileged above others, including herself. Hence, she decides to give up her flesh and blood, willingly to the European trader. She explains her feelings to Florens, "I stayed on my knees in the dust where my heart will remain each night and every day until you understand what I know and long to tell you" (*AM* 165). Hence, it is not until the end of the novel the readers acknowledge the act of Minha mae. At the end of the novel, Florens writes down her life on the walls. It is through this written record of her life that Florens gives meaning to her mother's sufferings and celebrates her act. She bonds with her and carves down her feelings as, "... mãe you can have pleasure now because the soles of my feet are harder than cypress" (*AM* 159). This can be considered enough of a reward for the mother who chose to be endowed and liberated through the sufferings she experiences. The mother-child bond is regained at the end of the novel. It is through this bond that Florens gets her a sense of identity and becomes a strong

female. Now she is strong enough to pass on her experience and culture, even if it must be done by carving it on the walls and floors of Vaark's abandoned Eden.

As the concept of "Black Motherhood" is vividly portrayed through the character Minha mae, Morrison also stresses on sisterhood for female solidarity in this novel. She executes her feminist ideas in the sisterhood relationship that provided a sense of support among the four women in Vaark's farm. They are not all blacks. All of them are from different ethnicities. Unlike the sisterhood seen in *Sula* between two black females, in *A Mercy* Morrison depicts sisterhood that protected women irrespective of their race. All four women are different in their color and appearance as they belonged to different cultures. They are weak and vulnerable. They are all slaves in different ways. The four women feel the need to support one another, as well as to make crucial decisions on how they would survive. For them it becomes a matter of life and death and "a way to be in the world," especially after Vaark's death (*AM* 46). Morrison builds her brief vision of how they would survive this physical and psychological trauma on two major feminist concepts. Sisterhood and motherhood are the two concepts that run throughout the novel. The four female characters resort to sisterhood as a solution through which they share each other's pain and sufferings. It is sisterhood rather than friendship that is significant in maintaining their relationship.

Through sisterhood, the female characters in the novel get together and transform their relationships. Bell Hooks (1995) in her article, "Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women" argues that, "the alienation, competition, and dehumanization that characterize human interaction can be replaced with the feeling of intimacy, maturity, and a camaraderie" (21). The female characters, Lina, Rebekka,

Florens, and Sorrow support each other in different ways and they establish solidarity that makes them more capable of moving on in life.

All the characters in the novel *A Mercy* are orphans, parentless and dispossessed in the beginning; “They were orphans, each and all” (*AM* 57). To start with, Jacob Vaark’s mother dies in childbirth. This leads Vaark to be abandoned to an institutional life in an orphanage. Vaark’s father is a Dutch and he takes no effort to support or help Vaark. However, Vaark is saved from poverty by the inheritance of an uncle, who leaves him 120 acres of farmland in Maryland, Virginia. To assist him on the farm, Vaark recruits the help of female “orphans”, citing a preference for female labor. Messalina is Vaark’s first assistant on the farm. She is a young Native American woman who has survived the decimation of her tribe by a virulent strain of pox. Initially she is taken in by the Presbyterians after her family’s death. Lina is grateful, however, she soon realizes their kindness does not extend to full acceptance. She is sold to Vaark and then on she manages his household competently. When Jacob has bought her, he is a bachelor. Lina is fourteen then. Though these females all live in despair, they unite to fight against the situation. Morrison says, “By the time Sir brought Sorrow home, the resident women were a united front in dismay” (*AM* 51). Though initially they do not want to accept Sorrow, later they pity her mongrelized state and start caring for her.

The women are able to challenge the very complex notions of the institutionalized sexism of patriarchy. His work force and servants call Jacob Vaark, as “Sir,” throughout the novel. Jacob is essentially good at heart. Though Vaark ridicules and loathes trading in flesh and thinks of it “a degraded business and hard,” (*AM* 29) he finds no harm in gathering money and in increasing his wealth from plantations that

employ slaves as labor. Hence, his character stands for the inception of the primary roots of capitalism and a capitalist society. Vaark knows very well that money is power. He is conscious that as a man, he must control the financial matters and therefore have governance over his society. All the female characters are, in one way or another, dependent on him. Rebekka is his uneducated, financially dependent, and inexperienced wife. He has literally bought her unseen and paid the price. The other three women Lina, Florens and Sorrow are his servants and work force, whose choices in life are very limited. As they get along with each other during his life and after his death, they are more able to console, aid and support one another. Contrarily, they all lose this completeness and oneness, when their bonding gets looser towards the end of the novel.

Toni Morrison points out her feminist views very clearly as she says, although all four women “have nothing in common with the views of each other, they had everything in common with one thing: the promise and threat of men” (*AM* 96). Lina experiences and suffers from the destruction of her land and nation at the hands of men. Sorrow becomes the play of men in the ship, though the prostitutes on board the ship fight with them. Rebekka “after a mutually loving relationship, became children when the man was gone. Without the status or shoulder of a man, without the support of family or well-wishers a widow was in practice illegal” (*AM* 96). The destruction both in physical and psychological means, happens invariably to all women, when men possess women. The American radical feminist, Janice Raymond states, “Women are taught to fixate on men” (240). This is exactly where Florens’s tragedy starts. Consequently, the strong protective bond among the four female characters is then broken. Florens goes too far in her admiration of the blacksmith. The ego of blacksmith swells to a bursting point and it destroys her. Rebekka’s love for Vaark, on the other

hand, causes her misery as much as it gives her life and happiness. One of the deprecations of Vaark's death is the way she transforms into a cruel piety. Morrison also comments what it is to be a woman in the novel as she says, "... to be a female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if the scars form, the festering is ever below" (*AM* 161). In an interview with Nellie McKay, Morrison herself states, "some women are weak and frail, and hopeless, and some are not. I write about both kinds, so one should not be more disturbing than the other. In the development of characters there is value in different effects" (Mc Kay 428). Morrison does not create women who fit into a specific setting, or stand as a model for a specific purpose. Morrison presents her readers with realistic women who believe in particular ideals. Morrison portrays the essence of the black female experience as a member of the black community.

As a notion, "sisterhood" was crucial to the success of second wave feminism in the 1970s. Oyeronke Oyewumi in her article "Ties That (Un) Bind: Feminism, Sisterhood and Other Foreign Relations," says that the meaning and value of sisterhood "arise due to shared oppression and common victimization, and aims at solidarity and collective activism" (3). The model promoted is usually the rhetoric of empathy and familial bonds. Feminists believed in this notion and they had a sense of "common cause." Feminists wanted to replace the male model of individualism with a female model of "sisterhood." Therefore, domination that prevails in the patriarchal society should be substituted by partnership that would bring about a different sense of commitment. For many years, the four female characters in *A Mercy* invest much time, energy and passion in the formation of "women centered" relationships. They do so to counter to the deprivation that, in their own ways, each and every one of them has experienced in the man-centered, male-focused society, where Vaark is the center to

which they all hold and the nucleus around whom they revolve. They are trying to form a peaceful society, where their search for and dependence on man would be less urgent.

At the end of the novel *A Mercy*, the vital and most important event is Florens's change and her fulfillment. She attains an identity and individuality for herself. Her emotional reunion with her mother re-shapes her and she attains a new self. Her self-fulfillment is through the Afro-American cultural code of African Motherhood. Women are only empowered by and through motherhood. The soles of her feet have become "hard as Cypress," though it is by the hard way. By reclaiming her identity and freeing herself from the blacksmith, Florens finds voice and individuality. Raymond argues that "when women turn their eyes toward their selves and other women, they put the world in perspective... they can choose their line of vision" (241). On doing so, Florens develops a better and stronger character. By looking into herself, she becomes more capable of reaching a better understanding of herself and of the world around her. She also becomes capable of expressing her trauma in words rather than perpetually gazing at the blacksmith. She now takes pride in herself; "I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving" (*AM* 159).

The last chapter in *A Mercy* is the account by Minha mae. The chapter talks about her emotions and about the justified act of giving away Florens to Jacob Vaark. The chapter also has much of the mother's advice to her daughter. She wants her daughter to be freed from submission and slavery. She says, "... 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" (*AM* 165). To submit yourself to another person is a wrong thing to do and it cannot be forgiven. These words from Minha mae is a strong illustration of how motherhood will try to empower the children.

Tackling *A Mercy* from a feminist point of view and examining the two notions of motherhood and sisterhood, broadens the understanding of women's state in the colonial and post-colonial world of the 17th century. The analysis of the novel highlights the roots of marginality and the ugly and immoral process of bothering women for gender or race reasons. The reclaiming of an individual and a cultural identity can only happen if there is as good motherhood or sisterhood for the women strangled. This summarizes not only Afro-American history, which Morrison dramatizes in her novels, but also the history of women everywhere of all races and ethnicities. Women's enslavement, the abolition of whole races, and conformance to a sexist, patriarchal society are all issues discussed in *A Mercy*.

Akin to the victims of *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye*, there are victims in *A Mercy*. These victims are all exploited of their own self and left to wander in days of illusion. There is no mercy at the hands of these predators in exploiting them to the very possible extent that can be done before literally taking of their lives. Minha mae is an innocent black belonging to West Africa. She is traded and sold to the Portuguese merchant D'Ortega. She is then sexually abused by her master. The character Sorrow, though not an African, suffers terribly in the hands of Sawyer and his sons. At the age of eleven, when she is just a child she is sexually abused and degraded by men of the Sawyer family. She has no living for her own. In Vaark's farm, she gives birth to a child, who dies soon. Later, she is threatened and abused by men around Vaark's farm. The reality is that, Sorrow does not exactly know the father of both her children. She gets some courage and hope only after the birth of her second child. From the state of a destitute, she transforms to a responsible mother. Morrison here stresses the devastation that could happen to a female child, and to a woman in a world run by patriarchal

ideology. In *A Mercy*, the core point to be noted is that women, irrespective of their origin and ethnicity, are affected and ruined by men.

Morrison primarily focuses on feminism in the novel *A Mercy*. There is a low note of “Black Feminist Voice” that can be heard through *A Mercy*, though the “Feminist Ideas” are easily perceptible. In her other novels, such as *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye*, “Black Feminism” gains huge momentum. Florens is the child of an African mother and a Portuguese slave owner. She is also forbidden of her mother’s love and is just traded as a commodity between the merchants of the colonial world. Florens, Minha mae and Sorrow are victims of capitalism, patriarchy and colonialism.

Though “each woman embargoed herself; spun her own web of thoughts unavailable to anyone else,” (*AM* 131-132) the four women in the novel, in one way or another, form their own identities and reach individuality. Their individuality is greatly paid for. It costs wounds and tears to form their future. Though sisterhood is essential for the survival of the four female characters, later the sisterhood fails and proves to be a false and wrong notion for the inhabitants of the farm. This happens after the change in Rebekka’s character after Vaark’s death and after Florens has gone in search of a man. All four women are separated and the bond between them is disintegrated. However, motherhood is very fulfilling to some of them and its loss is fully frustrating to some. The loss of motherhood is frustrating to Rebekka. The main challenge that all the female characters have to face is recalling the past and having the courage to tackle it, however traumatic it may have been. That is the only thing that will help them carry on, and allow for authentic life. On the other hand, suppressing the past and ignoring it causes enslavement and holds the inner life prisoner to persistent fears.

Hence, in *A Mercy*, Morrison is seen mainly as a Feminist and she supports feminist ideas through the passages of the novel. As race was not an issue during the inception of slavery, it was capitalism, colonialism and patriarchy that sowed the seeds of racism and thereby the degradation and ruining of the lives of blacks years later. Slavery, as it was common for all the poor was later focused only towards the African blacks in America. The black trade was followed by slavery and its institutionalization. Slavery initially was against the poor and disadvantaged. Then the issue of race sprouted. Hatred against blacks and Africans followed and slavery was directed only against this race. After the institutionalization of slavery, blacks were slandered of their lives and victimized. Sethe of *Beloved* and Pecola of *The Bluest Eye* are the principal victims in all of Morrison's novels. Charles E. Silberman says, "Slavery became associated with race, and race with inferiority; the two concepts merged. And so black man meant inferior; inferior meant black" (Silberman 92).

Monica Michlin rightly has said in her article that the novel *A Mercy* is a prologue to *Beloved*, Florens living in a setting of 200 years before Sethe has lived. Within this period, slavery was institutionalized and blacks were primarily victimized. She says "slave trade is allegorized as a 'pox' upon America, which turns the apparent utopia of orphans on the Vaark farm into a cruel dystopia reminiscent of the (No) Sweet Home plantation in *Beloved*" (Michlin 1).

Florens lives in the age of the disastrous Atlantic slave trade, which has persisted for more than three centuries. When she lives, there is no racism; however, slavery exists which is deeply rooted in the minds of capitalists, industrialists and traders. They have subdued anyone who is economically and socially disadvantaged irrespective of the color. Irrespective of color, there is female oppression and

patriarchal domination. Florens and women of other ethnicities in Vaark's farm prefer to stay together and they successfully develop a sense of sisterhood to carry themselves through adverse times. Moreover, it is motherhood that has helped these females to regain their strength and life, which is lost to men. However, the situation has now changed. Earlier, victims are women of any race. Now, the sufferers are to be blacks and mostly black females. Racism has started thriving shortly after slavery is established and there is oppression of only the blacks and mainly the black females. The black females are now made as victims in the hands of whites and men who are both black and white. The victims of Morrison are the daughters of Florens--Pecola and Sethe.