CHAPTER IV

JOURNEY TOWARDS SELF-REALIZATION

- BELOVED

- A MERCY
I will call them my people,
Which were not my people;
and her beloved,
which was not beloved.

Romans 9:25  (New Testament)
Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) is one of the landmarks in her achievements. It is this remarkable novel for which she won the 1993 Nobel Prize for literature. It is her most read, most analysed and widely accepted creation. It also has a very successful cinematic version starring Oprah Winfrey and Danny Glovers. The novel demonstrates how history is not over and done with. Morrison gives voice to previously silenced stories. She allows the reader to re-vision history. *Beloved* represents the most oppressed period of slavery in the history of African people. It penetrates, perhaps more deeply than any historical or psychological study could, the unconscious emotional and psychic consequences of slavery. *Beloved* is a story of a slave girl, Sethe, who kills her own daughter to protect her from slavery. Through the portrayal of the slave character ‘Sethe’, Morrison attempts to expose a truth about the interior life of the historical figure, Margaret Garner. A slave who escaped from Kentucky to Cincinnati, Ohio, Margaret Garner attempted to kill all four of her children when her slave owner found her, and she actually succeeded in killing one child, an infant daughter. While editing *The Black Book* which was published in 1974, Morrison came across the curious case of Margaret Garner. Morrison wanted to re-invent Garner’s life and be accessible to the characters. In using this historical account of Margaret Garner as the beginning point for her story of Sethe – she is “intent on investigating not only the collective memories of the physical traumas the slaves endured but also the internalised and abiding psychic wounds caused by racial shaming in a white supremacist system” (Bouson 133). By centring her novel on the act of infanticide, Morrison captures the unspeakable haunting of slavery. It is through this true historical incident that she exposes the shameful treatment of African-American slave mothers who, according to the racist constructions of 19th century apologists for slavery, were “more primitive” than women and were “not civilised’- not really ‘attached’ to their children” (Wolff 107). Beloved is also counted among the best neo-slave narratives. The story of a black woman slave like Sethe was
never told before by black male writers because their primary focus was upon their own journey to wholeness. Firstly, it was Linda Brent, who took a pseudonym to hide her identity, collected the slave experience in her *Incidents in the life of a Slave Girl* (1861). After 125 years Shirley Anne Williams’ *Dessa Rose* (1986) was published and that it was followed by Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987). Due the horrors of slavery “Sethe’s murder of Beloved is transformed onto what Morrison explores the ultimate gesture of loving mother whose action displays killing her children is preferable than a terrible death” (Gosavi 136).

Morrison re-tells history through the lives of ordinary people with women characters that struggles in a world created for the convenience of others. Through these characters and the lives of those around them, readers learn a history that cannot be found in text books. Morrison has succeeded in “revising” or “re-visioning” American history to tell the plight of the African slaves. It “explores the emotional legacy of slavery among Black people in the United States…The novel weaves their memories as they come to terms with their personal and collective past” (Singh 100-1). The novel describes Sethe’s quest for wholeness and freedom in slavery. The novel concerns with Sethe’s formal life as a slave on Sweet Home Plantation. It describes Sethe’s escape with her children, which seem to be her as heaven, and the tragic events that follow. Beloved reappears as a sensuous young woman after eighteen years to claim her mother’s love, which Sethe had killed in order to save her from a “fate worse than death”. Sethe stands at the heart of the text surrounded by other characters of Baby Suggs, Denver, Paul D, Halle Suggs, Sixo, etc. the schoolteacher and his nephew express the record of cruelty and violence over the slaves at the Sweet Home Plantation. *Beloved* starkly portrays cruelty, violence, degradation, physical tortures as well as the psychological fragmentation, the black wounded psyche. It represents the most oppressed period of slavery in the history of African-American people dealing with an integral part of black culture and
social identity. Morrison explores the dominant racial American culture which imposes an expression of absence of black identity. Via Sethe, Morrison shows how the entire slaves suffered. The tortures of slavery grip the subconscious of every African-American. As Morrison rightly puts it, the history of slavery and the pain attached to it is what “characters don’t want to remember, I don’t want to remember, black people don’t want to remember, white people don’t want to remember. But Beloved is not about slavery as an institution, it is about those anonymous people called ‘slaves’” (Bonnie 68-70). In reclaiming, recreating and resurrecting the lives of those who lived through slavery, Morrison writes a new history. The author’s intent is not only to depict Sethe, Garner’s fictional counterpart, in her attempts to deal with her past as the murderer of her child, but also to reveal a country’s past, and the ability of that past to remain alive through its collective and individual memories. The incarnate past is represented in the novel by the character Beloved, the spirit of Sethe’s murdered child, who first appears as a ghost and then is housed in an adult woman’s body. The lives of each character are bound to the past. Shifting the point of view as flashbacks of previous events, Morrison illustrates the impact of the incidents on each character.

With each flashback, they become symbolic markers, station of the cross demanding a measure of both reverence and horror: Sethe’s escape, Denver’s birth, the death of the baby, Paul D’s escape from the chain gang. With each return comes more knowledge of circumstances, more revelation of characters. (Cryer 20)

In Beloved to depict the historical reality of the period Morrison focuses on the 1860s and 70s. To describe a particular slave, Baby Suggs’ family, Morrison
takes back the story to the pre-civil war period. The text looks back to the mid-
nineteenth century when black men and women were treated as sub-humans.

During, before and after the War he had seen Negroes so stunned, or
hungry, or tired or bereft, it was a wonder they recalled or said
anything. Who, like him, had hidden in caves and fought owls for
food; who, like him, stole from pigs; who, like him, slept in trees in
the day and walked by night; who, like him, had buried themselves in
slop and jumped in wells to avoid regulators, raiders, paterollers,
veterans, hill men, posses and merrymakers. Once he met a Negro
about fourteen years old who lived by himself in the woods and said
he couldn’t remember living anywhere else. He saw a witless
coloredwoman jailed and hanged for stealing ducks she believed were
her own babies. (Morrison 81)

In the beginning of novel, Sethe remembers the Kentucky plantation called
Sweet Home where she had worked as a slave. Sethe’s own mother had killed
all the children fathered by whites who raped her. As Nan, tells her, “She threw
them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The
others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them”
(77-78). A mother’s selflessness and her instinct to protect her children from the
evils of slavery, culminate in murder, in infanticide. The reader does not feel the
horror of the deed, as much as the reader feels the horror of the circumstances
that lead to the deed. In this novel Morrison allows the reader to share the legacy
of slavery as the character Sethe, Paul D and Denver attempt to make a new life
in freedom. It is at Sweet Home that Sethe feels free for the years that she
spends with Halle. She marries him and happily bears his children. Her nostalgic
memory of Sweet Home, in spite of the emotional suffering that she endured there, reflects the “romanticized” past of slavery which was internalized by blacks. Morrison challenged American history which “romanticizes” the past, in particular, the past of slavery. Sethe feels lucky to have coupled with Halle and who fathered all four of her children. From Baby Suggs, whose freedom was purchased by her son, Halle, she learns this to be the exception rather than the rule.

Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn’t run off or been hanged, got rented out, loan out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized. So Baby’s eight children had six fathers. 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. (29)

From Baby Suggs only Sethe learns that daughters can disappear before they have their permanent teeth and that a son can be traded for a lumber, though the mother has given her body for month to the straw boss in an attempt to prevent the child’s leaving. Baby tells Sethe that she would not love her other children; psychologically, she cannot pay the price loving demands. Life at Sweet Home holds a different set of terrors for Sethe. After her sons Howard and Buglar are born and the “crawling – already? girl” (187) later to be called Beloved, is still being nursed by Sethe, Mr. Garner dies and his brother-in-law, schoolteacher, arrives to run the plantation with Mrs. Garner. His arrival marks Sethe’s initiation to slavery’s worst attributes. When Mr. Garner was alive, the slaves had experienced other side i.e. the less brutal or less physically abusive than the successor, schoolteacher. But with the schoolteacher and his nephews
start a journey of brutal and painful living. He becomes symbolic of treacherous institutional evil.

… the White, the Europeans who claim to be more educated, more civilized and more cultivated are portrayed as more barbaric, more uncivilized, and more beastly when they unleash so much violence. For example, the schoolteacher who is supposed to be the representative of a cultivated and disciplined outlook on life fails to stop his nephews when they violate every lesson of the book called humanity and put Sethe down and steal her milk. (Kochar 62)

The schoolteacher personifies the worst ever form of evil in Morrison’s discourse. He discerns Sethe in the objectified role of a breeder for enhancing plantation capital. He legitimizes his scientific experimentation on the black race as uncivilized, animalistic and base and finds rationale for civilizing and educating the race which he argues is his birthright as a descendant of civilized white race.

Schoolteacher symbolizes the most treacherous kind of institutional evil … because it operates with the approval of a culture well able to guard its innocence under the guise of reason. Schoolteacher’s ubiquitous notebook is emblematic of the disinterested scientific racism that has marked western culture. (Otten 86)
Sethe overhears the schoolteacher discussing and instructing and his nephews “to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right” (193). She guesses the brutal intentions of the schoolteacher and both she and Halle resolve to escape north to seek freedom. Sethe succeeds in getting her children on board the northbound caravan. But before she joins them, the schoolteacher’s assistants violate Sethe in the most inhuman way. Sethe tells Paul D later as she recounts the sexual abuse while pregnant with Denver:

… those boys came in there and took my milk. That’s what they came in there for. Held me down and took it. I told Mrs. Garner on em. She had that lump and couldn’t speak but her eyes rolled out tears. Them boys found out I told on em. Schoolteacher made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still. (20)

Not only Sethe suffers the indignity of the nephews with their “mossy teeth” (39) at her breasts, but she is also beaten for her refusal to remain silent about the incident. The tree-shaped scar, with its “intricate branches” (21) symbolises the far-reaching implications the incident has on her life. The nephews take the milk intended for the “crawling already? girl” (187). Sethe is violated as a mother, as a woman, as a human. It comes as no surprise that when the slave catchers appear at 124 Bluestone Road, where Sethe reaches to live with Baby Suggs and Halle, she reacts as a mother. Her instincts are to protect her children. She will kill them before she sees them suffer the abuse she has so intimately experienced.
Sethe’s excruciating pain lies in her memories of the taking of her milk which are compounded by the fact that she never sees her husband Halle again. Years later this incident Paul D is able to explain. Halle had watched from the loft in the barn while Sethe was abused: “It broke him, Sethe”. Paul D looked up at her and sighed. “You may as well know it all. Last time I saw him he was sitting by the churn. He had butter all over his face” (85). Sethe is deprived of the husband, as he is psychologically devastated by the atrocity he has witnessed. Morrison’s narrative style of revealing this further effect of incident years after its occurrence communicates the ability of the past to remain alive in the present through its continual unfolding. Such revelations indicate that remembering may be more dangerous than forgetting. Sethe succeeds in delivering her three children to the woman working for the Underground Railroad, and survives her own escape which also encompasses the birth of Denver. She escapes to Ohio, pregnant, barefoot and mutilated. When she is emptied from her maternal milk, she feels she is robbed, she feels, as if the very essence is being taken away from her. Sethe’s psychological troubles could be measured upon by her physical appearance.

In course of her journey, which is full of pain, Sethe meets a white girl, Amy, who cares for her, soothes her and helps her deliver the baby. Morrison uses the birth of Denver to show the sensitivity of a white girl to Sethe’s condition. Also Morrison projects the unmitigated spirit of Sethe who bears all the pain to reach her children. Her spirit is not broken though her body is tortured and brutally exploited. Her unreeling spirit leads Sethe to her waiting children. Amy Denver, the white girl, nurses Sethe’s bleeding back and feet. The Baby which is born is named after the white girl. Denver never tires of hearing Sethe tell the story of her birth, and Sethe never fails to remember that without Amy’s help she may not have lived to reach Cincinnati and her children who waited there. This incident serves as a bridge which connects two settings of the
novel – Sweet Home in Kentucky and 124 Bluestone Road in Cincinnati. The former depicts slavery’s impact on particular individuals.

It is a world in which people suddenly disappear and are never seen again, not through accident or covert operation or terrorism, but as a matter of everyday legal policy. (Atwood 49)

The incidents which occur in Cincinnati depict a different set of horrors; reconstruction for the survivors of Sweet Home becomes a struggle “keeping the past at bay” (52). Sethe’s journey of pain and trauma continues as she arrives at 124 Bluestone Road. The reader is required, from the first line of the novel, to suspend disbelief and to enter the house understanding that it is haunted. The house has been given to live in to Baby Suggs by an abolitionist. She sponsors a party for the ninety neighbours who appear to share in the excess of food and the joy of the escaped slaves. The next day however the neighbours are consumed by their jealousy and ostracize the woman they so readily embraced.

Baby Suggs’ three (may be four) pies grew to ten (may be twelve). Sethe’s two hens became five turkeys. The one block of ice brought all the way from Cincinnati – over which they poured mashed watermelon mixed with sugar and mint to make a punch – became a wagonload of ice cakes for a washtub full of strawberry shrug. 124, rocking with laughter, goodwill and food for ninety, made them angry. Too much, they thought. Where does she get it all, Baby Suggs, holy? Why is she and hers always the center of things? How come she always knows exactly what to do and when? Giving advice; passing
messages; healing the sick, hiding fugitives, loving, cooking, cooking, loving, preaching, singing, dancing, and loving everybody like it was her job and hers alone. (168)

Baby Suggs has institutions of the jealousy caused by the excess, but rather than focusing on their hatred and emotions, she finds herself concerned with a future which is “Dark and coming’ (170). Her inclinations prove right as it culminates into the murder of the infant. Indeed, the complexity of the novel stems from the fact that it constantly merges the physical and the psychical, the literal and the metaphorical. The arrivals and departures of Beloved easily lend themselves to a metaphorical reading. The novel begins in 1873 at Sethe’s house, haunted ever since she killed her baby daughter rather than let her be taken back to slavery in accordance with the Fugitive Slave Act. (Grewal 107) The appearance of schoolteacher and his nephews catapults Sethe into the extreme and irrevocable action at the heart of the novel. Morrison’s use of flashbacks helps the reader to understand the thoughts which precipitate Sethe’s act of infanticide.

Simple: she was squatting in the garden and when she saw them coming and recognized schoolteacher’s hat, she heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her head cloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe. And the hummingbird wings beat on. (200)
Sethe felt as if the tortures went along with her like shadow wherever she went. She placed her children in the safety of a handsaw. Sethe simply took an axe to the “crawling already? baby” and slashed her throat. She was about to bash in Denver’s head on the barn wall, when an old black man who aided in her escape to Cincinnati, Stamp Paid, stopped her.

The scene unfolds largely through the eyes of the white men who, under the Fugitive Bill, have come to claim Schoolteacher’s human property. After a description of Sethe in the woodshed, the narration moves to Schoolteacher’s understanding of what has just happened… The narrative choice to handle the novel’s central incident this way has the effect of making the reader understand more compellingly Sethe’s horrific actions. Schoolteacher’s perspective reveals why Sethe cannot permit her children to be captured and taken back to slavery, for they will be returning to the world effectively signalled in his dehumanising, bestialising view of slaves. (Matus 106-7)

Though Sethe had not reconciled to her child’s loss, she rationalizes that it were better than being victimized by slavery that cannot protect her children had they been alive. Her reasons that it was solely and entirely her independent decision and as a mother she had a right to abort what was not her right to love. She defends the killing of what she had borne to love, as slavery contradicted her notion of love. Beloved depicts, “Slavery’s insidious power to distort the two most basic human instinct: love and self-preservation” (Sitter 18). Sethe’s last interaction with schoolteacher and the nephews involved the taking of her milk and her subsequent whipping when she had told about it to Mrs. Garner. The
memories of this incident are obviously linked to the immediacy and excessiveness of the action she commits in the barn. Sethe does not for a minute hesitate to think because her love for her children is so consuming. Her actions are not based upon consequences or the results that it will get but it is a mother’s desperate act to save her children from a worst fate. She pays a high price of it. She endures a prison term with her infant Denver and becomes the object of the community’s ostracism. Even after knowing the horrors of slavery, the community finds Sethe’s act of infanticide as incomprehensible and unforgivable. Sethe is cut off from her own culture. While protecting her selfhood, Sethe, like the character Sula, does not care for the community. She chooses to bear the outrageous behaviour of the place. After murdering her child, Sethe, like Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*, lives in the state where her marginality is confronted with the outside world. Paul D too fails in understanding or providing empathy.

This here Sethe talked about love like any other woman; talked about baby clothes like any other woman, but what she meant could cleave the bone. This here Sethe talked about safety with a handsaw. This here new Sethe didn’t know where the world stopped and she began. Suddenly he saw what Stamp Paid wanted him to see: more important than what Sethe had done was what she claimed. It scared him.

“Your love is too thick”, he said, thinking, That bitch is looking at me; she is right over my head looking down through the floor at me. “too thick?” she said, thinking of the Clearing where Baby Suggs’ commands knocked the pods off horse chestnuts. “Love is or it ain’t. Thin love ain’t love at all”…

“What you did was wrong, Sethe.” (202)
The house 124 Bluestone Road is affected by the death of the baby. Sethe’s sons Howard and Buglar sleep holding hands and teach Denver “die-witch!” stories (23), in fear that Sethe will wield the axe again. As soon as the baby’s ghost returns to the house, the boys run away.

“…the sons, Howard and Buglar, had run away by the time they were thirteen years old – as soon as merely looking in a mirror shattered it (that was the sign for Buglar); as soon as two tiny hand prints appeared in the cake (that was it for Howard). Neither boy waited to see more…” (03)

Sethe witnesses a change in Baby Suggs too. The ‘unchurched preacher’ (106) had consoled Sethe and all those who came to the clearing to hear her sermons of love.

“Here”, she said, “in this place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it, love it hard… Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face ‘cause they don’t love that either. You got to love it, you! … (108)

The death of Beloved with the slave catchers in the yard results in Baby’s abandonment of her preaching and a fixation on what is harmless in the world, colours. She takes to bed with a penchant for scraped of coloured cloth and
remains there. The ghost of the dead child does not remain passive and returns to haunt its family. The three women in the house Sethe, Baby Suggs and Denver are left to endure the Baby’s wrath. Sethe wishes to leave the house but Baby Suggs is doubtful:

“We could move”, she suggested once to her mother-in-law.

“What’d be the point?” asked Baby Suggs. “Not a house in the country ain’t packed to its rafters with some dead Negro’s grief. We lucky this ghost is a Baby. My husband’s spirit was to come back in here? Or yours? Don’t talk to me. You lucky. You got three left. Three pulling at your skirts and just one raising hell from the other side. Be thankful, why don’t you? (06)

The supernatural is accepted by Baby Suggs and since the ghost is accepted in the black culture, Beloved is projected as a ghost comes back in flesh. As Brian Finney explains, “Morrison’s use of supernatural is another important way in which she incorporates the Black oral Tradition into the main stream of the novel” (31). Toni Morrison believes that she sees the lives of a solitary person as representative of a culture of his or her tribe. Quoting her words Singh writes: “My sense of the novel is that it has always functioned for the class or the group that wrote it” … (Singh 110). The past suffering of the slaves cannot be forgotten. Leaving one memory behind will result in encountering others, perhaps more devastating than the first. Baby Suggs serves as a significant source of emotional support for Sethe. But the death of Baby Suggs leaves Sethe alone in the world with only one daughter and the ghost of another. The community ostracizes her and therefore no one is left to fall back upon. After Baby Suggs’ death the community distances itself from Sethe. Even Sethe
retaliates by refusing to attend the funeral service, remaining silent during singing of the hymns, and abstaining from the food the neighbours give. Sethe and Denver both endure the uproar created by the ghost, called Beloved after the one word Sethe is able to afford for the child’s headstone. In exchange she pays for it with her body to the tombstone engraver which again goes on to show the grave inhumane side of the black woman’s existence.

Reverend Pike spoke in a real loud voice, but I didn’t catch a word – except the first two, and three months later when Denver was ready for solid food and they let me out for good, I went and got you a gravestone, but I didn’t have money enough for the carving so I exchanged (bartered, you might say) what I did have and I’m sorry to this day I never thought to ask him for the whole thing: all I heard of what Reverend Pike said. Dearly Beloved, which is what you are to me and I don’t have to be sorry about getting only one word… (225-6).

The solitary existence of Sethe and Denver is broken when Paul D appears on the scene. He is immediately told of the ghost’s presence by Sethe and Denver. Denver no longer can tolerate the ostracism and longs to move on. Sethe however feels different in that she says “…No more running – from nothing. I will never run from another thing on this earth” (18). When Sethe tells Paul D about how her milk was stolen and a tree created on her back, Paul D vents his anger on the trouble making ghost, “You want to fight, come on! God damn it! She got enough without you. She got enough!” (22). His anger or challenge quietens the ghost. Yet though Sethe and Paul D enjoy a brief respite as lovers, the omens appear that Beloved remains. Denver too sights a white
dress kneeling beside her mother when she kneeled. Sethe’s affirmation in the belief of Beloved’s existence is indicated:

Denver picked at her fingernails. “If it’s still there, waiting, that must mean that nothing ever dies.”

Sethe looked right in Denver’s face. “Nothing ever does”, she said. (45)

Atwood notes, “…the dead cannot return from the grave unless called, and it’s the passions of the living that keeps them alive” (50). Sethe’s love, Denver’s loneliness and Paul D’s challenge combine to elicit the return of Beloved. The spirit returns in the form of a “history less” woman who appears in the yard. “She had new skin, lineless and smooth, including the knuckles of her hands” (63). The young woman wears high top shoes, shoes which Baby Suggs had seen in an ominous premonitions years before. The omens abound; HereBoy, the dog, flees the yard at once and Sethe excuses herself to pass her water. Symbolically, Sethe is “…she had an emergency that unmanageable… there was no stopping water breaking from a breaking womb and there was no stopping now” (63). As Atwood indicates “Beloved becomes a variety of things to the characters in the novel” (50). Even when Paul D had hoped to make a life with Sethe and Denver, that possibility was rendered null as Beloved’s presence occupies not only the house but their lives. Sethe becomes obsessed with caring for the woman and there forms a distance between Paul D and Sethe. Paul D is though uncomfortable by the presence of Beloved. At one point he becomes suspicious of her ability to reveal her origins. Even her looks and strength contradicts and disturbs Paul D.
“You just gonna feed her? From now on?” Paul D, feeling ungenerous, and surprised by it, heard the irritability in his voice.

“Denver likes her. She’s no real trouble. I thought we’d wait till her breath was better. She still sounds a little lumbar to me.”

“Something funny ‘bout that gal,” Paul D said, mostly to himself.

“Funny how?”

“Acts sick, sounds sick, but she don’t look sick. Good skin, bright eyes and strong as a bull.”

“She’s not strong. She can hardly walk without holding on to something.”

“That’s what I mean. Can’t walk, but I seen her pick up the rocker with one hand.” (69)

Paul D’s relationship with Sethe becomes increasingly strained and he takes to sleeping in other places in home. When he sleeps in shed, Beloved seduces him to coupling with her. His initial perception that Beloved has sexual intentions towards him intensifies. In order to ensure and safeguard the relationship with Sethe, she discovers the only way was to seduce Paul D. When Beloved invites a sexual relationship with Paul D, it’s more for winning Sethe’s maternal love rather than sexual hunger for a male. When Paul D responds to Beloved’s amorous advances owing to his own desire to protect Sethe from Beloved’s possession, he is unable to realize its implications, for Beloved is able to wrest the memories, that were repressed…”rusted tobacco tin” (88) owing to
his inability to deal with his pain, the pain of the knowledge that slavery had reduced him to mere animal, making him incapable of defining his manhood.

“Beloved.” He said it, but she did not go. She moved closer with a footfall he didn’t hear and he didn’t hear the whisper that the flakes of rust made either as they fell away from the seams of his tobacco tin. So when the lid gave he didn’t know it. What he knew was that when he reached the inside part he was saying, “Red heart. Red heart,” over and over again. Softly and then so loud it woke Denver, then Paul D himself. “Red heart. Red heart. Red heart.” (144)

The life that pulsated through “Red heart”, is Morrison’s metaphor for a human life, specifically, a black life that suffered distortion due to slavery’s evils, because of which Paul D had repressed the human side of his life explicit in Red heart. In a way his contact with the past (Beloved) necessitates his confronting himself and helps generate a self in reconstruction alongside Sethe, as both share a similar fate that is suggested in the end. Though after his encounter with Beloved sexually, Paul D is shamed and cannot maintain his relationship with Sethe. The thickness of Sethe’s love for her children drives Paul D from the house after Stamp Paid informs him of Sethe’s role in the death of the infant.

“What you did was wrong, Sethe.”

“’I should have gone on back there? Taken my babies back there?’”

“There could have been a way. Some other way.”
“What way?”

“You got two feet, Sethe, not four,” he said, and right then a forest sprang up between them; trackless and quiet… (203)

Sethe transfers her attention to Beloved in an excessive role of a mother. Beloved “becomes a demonic force returned to punish and to redeem Sethe, a remarkably ambiguous force able to ‘free’ Sethe at last from her past, but only by exacting an enormous price” (Otten 84). Their bond becomes mutually exclusive. Beloved represents not only Sethe’s murdered daughter but also slavery, the horrors of which are laid bare in a stage-by-stage revelation. So intense is Sethe’s absorption of her role that she fails to see it as a threat to her selfhood.

… Beloved could not take her eyes off Sethe… Sethe was licked, tasted, eaten by Beloved’s eyes… She rose early in the dark to be there, waiting, in the kitchen when Sethe came down to make fast bread before she left for work. In lamplight, and over flames of the cooking stove, their two shadows clashed and crossed on the ceiling like black swords. (71)

The clashing of shadows “emphatically ordain a threat to and dissolution of the mother-daughter relationship” (Rani 159). Morrison makes use of imagery to prefigure a conflict and eventual erasure or rupture of an intensified aberrational reunion of Sethe and Beloved. Ironically, Denver assumes that she will act as a protection for Beloved, should Sethe once again emerge as a threat. For Beloved she dismisses her suspicions as her own need for woman’s companionship is
more overpowering. Denver truly believes in “whatever her power and however she used it, Beloved was hers. Denver was alarmed by the harm she thought Beloved planned for Sethe, but felt helpless to thwart it, so unrestricted was her need to love another” (128). Though at first Denver tries to shield Beloved and her actions from Sethe when Paul D asks her to confirm Beloved’s strength of lifting the rocker. Denver denies in front of them. At heart she wants Beloved to be her friend that she never had. It is later that she realizes the hold of Beloved over Sethe. Denver gradually accepts the threat that Beloved possesses for her mother who becomes almost physically absorbed by Beloved. Sethe is fired from her job in restaurant, because she becomes habitually late to work. The sight of her mother weakened by a dramatic loss of weight, while a fattened Beloved has grown more domineering, is enough to make Denver consider leaving the home she has not left in twelve years. Denver knows that she must assume responsibility for the financial well-being of the home. Once “Denver begins to comprehend the enormity of Sethe’s love and experience “shame” for her mother’s suffering, she herself becomes morally alive. She can assume responsibility and reunite others in struggle to restore wholeness to a fallen humanity” (Otten 92).

Denver’s moving out of home, away from the confines of stereotype roles, is also her attempt at self-exploration. For the first time in her life, she really acts, and her action is independent of her mother and the outside hostile black community. She begins to understand the inner meaning of the reality that faces her. After understanding the past she seeks to rise above the past into a healthy and wholesome present. She steps, out of 124. Her meeting with her former teacher Lady Jones helps restore herself. Though white characters are marginalized in Morrison’s work, in this novel some white characters are infused with some humanity. It is Mr. Bodwin who saves Sethe from execution for the murder committed against her own daughter, and it is he again who helps
Sethe with a cook’s job at the Sawyer’s, thus allowing her economic sustenance, hitherto not allowed to black slave at Sweet Home. Morrison “draws a historical parallel in the forthright efforts of some humane whites who recognised the humanity of blacks in their country and worked for their liberation, resulting in the emancipation proclamation in 1863 where Sethe, Denver are poised” (Rani 174). Denver seeks Bodwin’s help for achieving an integrated identity. Though Denver has difficulty in making the move, but Baby Suggs communicates with her from “the other side” to motivate her to search for work.

Remembering those conversations and her grandmother’s last and final words, Denver stood on the porch in the sun and couldn’t leave it. Her throat itched; her heart kicked – and then Baby Suggs laughed, clear as anything. “You mean I never told you nothing about Carolina? About your daddy? You don’t remember nothing about how come I walk the way I do and about your mother’s feet, no to speak of her back? I never told you all that? Is that why you can’t walk down the steps? My Jesus my.”

But you said there was no defense.

“There ain’t.”

Then what do I do?

“Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on.” (300)

Denver’s first steps from 124 Bluestone Road mark the beginning of the end of Beloved’s hold over Sethe and the home. The community rallies to Denver’s aid. After she walks to Lady Jones’ house and discusses their need,
baskets of food appear in the yard. The black community comes forward transcending its hostility and helps her and her family for “they were sorry for her. Or for Sethe. May be they were sorry for the years of their disdain” (306). This enables her to comprehend her mother’s interior life, as a slave, the trauma, her helplessness, hopelessness, her love, her killing that is reinforced by Sethe’s own narrative. She is able to relive that experience and reinvent her culture and history that had dehumanised her people through the white culture’s sanctioned slavery: “Denver’s relation to the past is primarily historic rather than personal. Denver’s personal stake in retrieving the past…involves a familial and ancestral inheritance…” (Krumzholtz 404).

Through her understanding of the past, Denver is able to reclaim history as a black woman. Morrison says “the reclamation of the history of black people in this country is paramount in its importance because while you can’t really blame the conqueror for writing the history in his own way, you can certainly celebrate it” (Davis 224). As she gains more and more awareness of slave history, slave life and dominant white culture’s system and values, she develops greater understanding of Paul D’s pain, Baby Suggs’ distrust of the white and her eventual death, and Beloved’s attachment to Sethe, and Sethe’s own failings as a marginalized woman who had to execute a killing in order her daughter from a similar oppressive life. The community plays a key-role in helping Sethe and Denver. It is the community which earlier had ostracized them, now lends a support to take care of their own (people). Denver’s request for work so that she can provide for her mother and Beloved, results in an outpouring of generosity. Janey Wagon, a servant for the Bodwins, who has established Baby Suggs in her home years earlier, is particularly important in ridding the house of Beloved. After Denver gets employment, her conversation alerts Janey to Beloved’s presence in the home. Sethe becomes the center of the community’s talk:
The news that Janey got hold of she spread among the other colored woman. Sethe’s dead daughter, the one whose throat she cut, had come back to fix her. Sethe was worn down, speckled, dying, spinning, changing shapes and generally bedevilled. That this daughter beat her, tied her to the bed and pulled out all her hair. It took them days to get the story properly blown up and themselves agitated and then to calm down and assess the situation. They fell into three groups: those that believed the worst; those that believed none of it; and those, like Ella, who thought it through…It was Ella more than anyone who convinced the others that rescue was in order. (313-14)

Various women, like Ella, are infuriated. Ella, a spokeswoman and activist leads her female counterparts to protest and resist the evil that had threatened to erode Sethe’s life. “Whatever Sethe had done, Ella didn’t like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present” (315). Ella’s move is towards female bonding with Sethe, an essential aspect of black female culture. As a victim of white racism herself, she believed in forging ahead, leaving the past behind. As an expression of that belief, she activates her women folk to help recover Sethe’s individuality. The exorcism of Beloved becomes a community event. Ella and thirty other women issue their own challenge outside 124 Bluestone Road: “They stopped praying and took a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what the sound sounded like” (318). Thus the community draw upon its knowledge of the supernatural to induce Beloved to leave the home.

Conforming to the oral tradition, that was evolved much before the written one, symbolically giving ascendancy to a black oral culture,
Morrison inscribes the black female voice in feminist discourse, that protest against the intrusion into female space, discerned in the sound, the collective voice the women make. (Rani 177)

The unity of the women’s voice reminds Sethe of the gatherings in the clearing, leaving her “trembled like the baptized in its wash” (321). Sethe is catapulted back in time again as Mr. Bodwin approaches in the carriage to pick up Denver for work. Sethe imagines that he is Schoolteacher come again for her children. Denver and Ella restrain Sethe and prevent her from killing Mr. Bodwin, ironically the same abolitionist who saved her from the gallows when she killed Beloved years earlier. Sethe relives the paranoia though and acts not to kill Beloved the second time, as a symbol of love, but attempts to kill the white man [Mr. Bodwin] instead who she believed was responsible for denying her loved object. In the earlier such scene, of slavery, when Sethe acted to kill Beloved, the community had failed to respond to Sethe’s action, owing to their own self-denial. But in the scene re-enacted in Reconstruction, the community acts and metaphorically kills [exorcise] Beloved, a living ghost, forces them towards positive selfhood.

The supernatural existence of Beloved who acts as a scapegoat for evils of the past, threatens the neutralized set of inherited codes by which community defines itself. The climactic scene shows how a culture may find it necessary in a moment of crisis to exorcise its own demons in order to reaffirm its identity… (Lawrence 189)
Beloved’s appearance, naked and pregnant, to the onlookers, simply disappears. Only one explanation exists: “Later a little boy put it out how he had been looking for bait back of 124, down by the stream, and saw, cutting through the woods, naked woman with fish for hair” (328). Beloved’s departure brings the reappearance of Paul D. Anxious to restore Sethe to health, he finds Sethe in Baby Suggs’ bed, almost dying. She cries to him over the loss of Beloved, her “best thing” (335). But Paul D tries to teach her about loving oneself.

Only this woman Sethe could have left him his manhood like that. He wants to put his story next to hers.

“Sethe,” he says, “me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow.”

He leans over and takes her hand. With the other he touches her face. “You your best thing, Sethe. You are.” His holding fingers are holding hers.

“Me? Me?” (335)

Holding hands suggest identification of the other as an equal free from objectification. Touching her face, he acknowledges her selfhood. And finally, his calling her by her name, Sethe, implies that she is his beloved to be loved and cherished as an equal. Similarly Sethe who had suffered distortion of self during slavery and denial in Reconstruction through black racism, and the second coming of Beloved, also realizes self-worth imbued by her daughter and finally affirms herself as a black woman “Me? Me?” (335). Her initial surprise that Paul D has finally recognized her identity is followed by her sense of completion, her wholeness, in the refrain “Me”. Through Denver Sethe also
comes to terms with slavery and racism by refusing to allow it to invade her present, and acknowledges, she is her own Beloved, the self that she is, that she loves and respects, and calls her own.

In this novel Morrison depicts the dangers of loving, effects and traumas of slavery, racism as well as community strength – the blacks as a collective whole. All the main black women characters (Sethe, Baby Suggs, and Denver) pay a high price in terms of their commitments, their survival and their country’s racist approach. The returned ghost of Beloved speaks in a way, for all those lost souls who suffered and died during the middle passage. She speaks as one and the voice of many who were brought in the slave ships in a tormented and tortured journey. “Beloved embodies both the suffering and guilt of the past as well as the power and beauty of the past. There is a need to realize the past fully in order to have a future that is full of possibilities” (Singh 111). The black women of the novel – Baby Suggs, Sethe, Beloved and Denver all suffer tremendous emotional losses because of racism. Baby Suggs who could comprehend slavery better extends the same awareness to Sethe and her black counter-parts. But as the spiritual leader of her community, renounces her position because she realizes that no philosophy of hers can prevent the white men from re-entering her yard, as they did on the day Beloved died. She realizes the powerlessness inherent in her position as a black woman and cannot endure its consequences after the death of the infant. Her emergence from the “other side” to guide Denver from the house reveals Morrison’s optimism; the same past which holds the restless soul of a murdered infant contains the benevolent spirit of a sage preacher. “Baby Suggs represents an epistemological and discursive philosophy that shapes Morrison’s work, in which morality is not presented as black and white categories of good and evil…” (Krumzholtz 398). She embodies resilience and perseverance that were a necessary precondition for a black’s existence under slavery. She appears both in the slavery and past
slavery period, and hence provides insights into the horrors she was subjected to as a black and a female and measures they had to adopt for emotional and psychological survival. She is the most individualistic character portrayed by Morrison. Her rendition of blues is also her attempt to inspire her fellow blacks for sustaining self. She advocated and encouraged self-definition that did not exceed the bounds of black reality.

Like her grandmother, the character of another black female, Denver, also functions as Sethe’s protector. Sethe’s “charmed” child who survived both a treacherous escape from Sweet Home while in Sethe’s womb and the carnage in the shed which claimed her sister, first leaves the home merely to obtain a job so that she can provide for Sethe and Beloved. Unlike Sethe or Baby Suggs who consciously silenced their voice for their failure to confront reality, Denver rather makes her voice heard, which suggests her unconscious feminist awareness but owing to Sethe’s inability as a mother to educate her on both – black experience and her ancestral history, Denver’s character exists in cultural limbo. That Denver exists in a cultural limbo is suggested by Morrison through ice imagery that stands for death, here metaphorically.

…Then Denver stood up and tried for a long, independent glide. The tip of her single skate hit on an ice bump, and as she fell, the flapping of her arms was so wild and hopeless that all three – Sethe Beloved and Denver herself – laughed till they coughed. (214)

Flapping of arms suggest Denver’s inability to move beyond the confines of her narrow world of her home. Her attempt at her identity even as a child is, abruptly disrupted when she learns of her mother’s crime. Her effort for self-exploration through literacy and contact with the outside world is closed on her,
Denver suffers psychical dislocation. Her inability to reconcile to her mother’s crime accentuated by Baby Suggs’ death, and escape of her brothers, leave her in a perpetual emotional, psychological stasis. Her escape from the world of reality, suggest an alienation from self that survives through her adolescence. But realizing the death hold of Beloved over her mother, her survival instinct moves her out of this dread and for the first time in her life, she really acts, which is independent of her mother or the hostile black community. As she gains more and more awareness of slave history, slave life and dominant white culture’s system and values, she develops greater understanding. Following her understanding of slavery in all its levels of evil, Denver is able to take care of her mother but not at the expense of her growing self-consciousness. It suggests an increase in self awareness. For her, “…It was a new thought, having a self to look out for and preserve” (310). The power denied to the blacks in the racist slavery system is the same power wrested by Denver as she provides her narrative from a black woman’s perspective to pass on the story from generation to generation. The very end of the novel which states that it was not a story to pass on paradoxically appears to belie the crucial theme of the book that is imperative to preserve continuity through story, language and culture between generations of black women.

Sethe represents the capacity of the black woman to resort to extreme action to confront the racist environment which threatens her emotional and psychological survival with its atrocities. Sethe risks death in both her escape from the plantation and her decision to murder because the risks involved in failing to take action are far more threatening to her; she may lose her children. Her salvation lies in the future in which she must learn the value of self. Thus Beloved, both the incarnate “rememory” of her mother’s past and the guilt of her racist country, “clamours” for attention. The novel’s final pages are provided as
an explanation of why Beloved must be forgotten. One’s community contains both the living and the dead, both forces to be reckoned with.

In the fiction of Toni Morrison the black woman is often ostracized by the community. Pecola’s ugliness and Sula’s non-conformity causes others to turn away, while Sethe’s past makes her a pariah figure. All these black women pay a high price for the expression of the individuality. Pecola’s fate is insanity, while Sula dies and Sethe must pay for her actions with her isolation and guilt. All these outcasts illustrate the difficulties involved in defining oneself. And yet the characters, that of black women charter their own courses of fate and circumstances. From the rejection of black community in Pecola’s case to standing by each other i.e. black for black in Sethe’s case, there lies a subtle journey that can be traced. Psychologically all the black women characters face traumas and yet the readers feel the inner strength of the characters to pursue their journey of individuality, the self. The slipperiness of language is foreground in the novel as words glide from one frame of reference to other just as characters glide from one defining identity to another and the form of narrative from one genre to another. The language of slavery within Beloved is compromised of signs written with whips, fires, and ropes. It is this discourse that is literally inscribed on Sethe’s back by the dispassionate and the evil figure of the Schoolteacher. Throughout the narrative, the hard language of its voice is heard and the use of leaving ‘spaces’ marks a new mode of narration. Toni Morrison deliberately leaves gaps between the lines so that the reader can experience by entering them. Moreover, the storyteller draws on the voice of community, uniting through narrative, the lines of the teller, the listener, and the greater world of experience from which the story is drawn. The “multivocal” technique highlights the text. Numerous voices retell the same event, each from different perspectives, and none taking precedence over the others. Morrison’s use of the supernatural – first in the form of the ghost of the baby killed and then
in the appearance of the twenty-year-old Beloved, brings the important way in which Morrison incorporates the black oral tradition into the mainstream of the novel. *Beloved* also abounds in images and metaphors, which have a special significant place. They highlight the thematic core of the novel, which the images project the message clear and loud. Images of community and families abound the novel but especially of motherhood and milk provide the colour to the novel. Symbols abound in the fictive universe of Toni Morrison. The elements of nature and the various communities depicted in her novels, comment on the character’s actions. The mythic quality of her novels largely results from this. The deeds of her black female characters take on cosmic dimensions, as the foundation of their communities’ values are challenged. Morrison’s use of flashbacks suggests the different viewpoints and as a result these events get magnified each time they are scrutinized.

In the novels of Toni Morrison the black woman emerges as a woman of power. Though victimized by a racist society or the distorted perceptions of the others, they are galvanized into actions. And often, they are able to serve as guides for others in their communities. Each of Morrison’s novel ends with an epiphany. Frieda and Claudia understand the root of Pecola’s insanity, Nel appreciates the iconoclasm of Sula and Paul D is ready to teach an incredulous Sethe the value of self-love. Understanding is depicted as the onset of hope for a future in which the individual is cultivated and encouraged to blossom. Thus, the black woman’s power resides in the strength of her conviction and her willingness to place her life in a historical perspective which recognizes her ancestral heritage. The existence of the community is both her challenge and her salvation; she must both protect her individuality and preserve its traditions.
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It wasn't a miracle. Bestowed by God. It was a mercy. Offered by a human.

Toni Morrison
Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy* (2008) depicts the poignant lives of bonded labor that for a brief spell in American history also bonded men and women of disparate and desperate origins. The seventeenth century colonial America, before race was formulated as an essence and marker to divide those deemed worthy of freedom from those not. It links nation building – the creation and inhabitation of the country – to the forced labor of Africans, the decimation of Native American nations and the transmutation of earth into farms. Toni Morrison delineates in this novel the history that was “before”. It is the shaping of the period that fascinates her.

Toni Morrison explains how her interest in the “before” – the period before the time of the American nation, when the New World was still “ad hoc” and claimed by competing imperialism – motivated her research into the history of the early seventeenth century… This labor force of expropriated constituencies, indentured labourers, and slaves from Africa constituted the inter-cultural, multi-ethnic and multilingual multitude that set foot in the New World. Despite their different origins, these migrants were bounded by similar conditions of servitude and bondage long before they were divided into the White Christians and the naturally depraved Africans by the policies and institutions of racism. (Karavanta 724)

*A Mercy* demonstrates Toni Morrison’s preoccupation with the history and communities. She questions the exceptional politics of the national community that operates at the expense of the marginalized. By going through the history, she journeys “to a site to see what remains were left” (Tally 81). Morrison’s text reconstructs, reinvents the overlooked elements from a counter
memory to the dominant national politics. Further, this generates the narratives that reinvigorate the novel and nation’s historical as well as literary discourses. Toni Morrison believed she could create what previously did not exist. And therefore she makes use of “rememory”. Morrison is alert to the tangible presence of past in the present and the hauntingly disruptive influence of characters’ own memories and those of others that are never or only partially articulated or recovered. “Don’t be afraid. My telling can’t hurt you” (01), Florens tells the reader in the opening pages of *A Mercy*. She tells her story in the first person. *A Mercy* is a rich web of intertwined tales of several girls from different backgrounds, unravelling the universal vulnerability of tender-aged girls to brutal disruptions. Florens – a daughter of slavery – saved from plantation life by an act of mercy her unnamed mother asks of Jacob Vaark, a merchant who takes her away in exchange for a debt. She is thus “staged as the mocking historian whose specter returns to present her archive, a collection of the stories that make up the history of her community” (Karavanta 727). Florens asks the reader not to be afraid of her “telling” despite her haunting presence – “I promise to lie quietly in the dark – weeping perhaps or occasionally seeing the blood once more” (01). Florens does not write the history of the origin, but rather to make her present and show how she, albeit expropriated and enslaved, has always lived inside history through a story told in her own words. Mockingly, she says that her “beginning begins with the shoes. When a child i am never able to abide being barefoot and always beg for shoes, anybody’s shoes, even on hottest days. My mother, a minha mãe, is frowning, is angry at what she says are my prettify ways” (02). Her abandonment by her mother to Jacob is beyond her understanding. Though it is an act of mercy, Florens misunderstands her mother’s reasoning. She remembers, 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 mãe begs no. Her baby boy is still at her breast. Take the girl, she says, my daughter, she says. Me. Me. (05)

Through Florens, Morrison portrays the effects of racism where blacks were treated as commodities to be traded. It is unbelievable for Florens that her mother could separate herself from her daughter. At the same time the treatment almost accorded to the blacks can be clearly seen in the way the exchange takes place at the hands of D’Ortega. For him the slaves were things to be bartered. He even ordered the slave girls to be with the men. It is at the end of the novel that the mother justifies her action giving Florens away in order to save her from a fate worse than death.

So it was as a black that I was purchased by Senhor, taken out of the cane and shipped north to his tobacco plants. A hope, then. But first the mating, the taking of me and Bess and one other to the curing shed. Afterwards, the men who were told to break we in apologized. Later an overseer gave each of us an orange, and it would have been all right. It would have been good both times, because the results were you and your brother. But then there was Senhor… (163-4)

Unfortunately the young Florens does not understand that her mother sacrificed her in order to save her from a terrible future. She had pure intentions
– valuing her daughter more than herself to save the child from potential sexual abuse. She believed that ‘Sir’ was a kind human.

When the tall man with yellow hair came to dine I saw he hated the food and I saw things in his eyes that said he did not trust Senhor, Senhora or their sons. His way, I thought, is another way. His country far from here. There was no animal in his heart. He never looked at me the way Senhor does. He did not want. (161)

Begging to save her infant son (who will likely die without her care) as well as provide a life-altering opportunity for her daughter, the mother gives away her own chance of living a better life so that both her children will survive. As Hooks 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 the system” (Hooks 44). Just like Sethe in Beloved goes to the extreme and commits infanticide in order to protect or save her child from a horrible fate. Florens though takes her abandonment negatively which creates distrust in her though it can be argued that at such tender age it was logical for her to do so. This distrust of her though she carries throughout the novel, eventually ending in a violent reaction toward a child she views as a competitor. Florens does not learn to navigate relationships. Though the strength of her character comes out when she is sent to fetch the freed man ‘Blacksmith’ to cure Rebekka, the mistress’ illness. The novel is structured by sixteen year old Florens’ departure from and return to the farm in search of the blacksmith in 1690. Morrison gives a blunt picture of the time with its fluid contradictions. A Mercy brings us the poignant lives of bonded labor “that for a brief spell in American history also bonded men and women of disparate and desperate origins” (Grewal 191). The novel is set in
seventeenth century colonial America, before race was formulated as a marker
to divide those worthy of freedom from those who were not deemed worthy. Set
in a New World landscape, the novel unfolds the beauty and terror of
wilderness, the unsentimental slave trade and indentured labor as well as
religious overtones. The novel is narrated in turns by seven characters, all
orphans more or less, forming a loose-knit kinship on Jacob Vaark’s homestead
in Dutch Anglo New York. Jacob Vaark inherits land from an uncle and
purchases from some Presbyterians, a Native American woman, Lina, to help
run the farm. He then acquires his English wife, Rebekka, sold to him by her
family as a mail order bride, and pick up a shipwreck survivor, Sorrow, in
exchange for lumber. Finally, Jacob gains Florens, an African slave girl, as debt
repayment. Also from the neighbouring farm are Willard and Scully, English
bonded labourers loaned to him in “exchange for land under lease” (05). A
Mercy offers poetic vignettes of the limited and traumatized lives of the men and
women who help run the farm.

Florens, on arrival, is immediately taken under wing by Lina, the Native
American slave. She seizes upon the opportunity to protect Florens.

Lina had fallen in love with her right away, as soon as she saw her
shivering in the snow. A frightened, long-necked child who did not
speak for weeks but when she did her light, singing voice was lovely
to hear. Some how, some way, the child assuaged the tiny yet eternal
yearning for the home Lina once knew where everyone had anything
and no one had everything. Perhaps her own barrenness sharpened her
devotion. In any case, she wanted to protect her… Florens had been a
quiet, timid version of herself at the time of her own displacement.
Prior to Florens’ arrival on Jacob’s farm, Lina has coped with her solitude by expunging the memory of her family, who, along with her entire tribe, has been decimated by small pox. She explains that isolation of her new life combined with the memory of her dead family and perished tribe, threaten to undo her. “Solitude, regret and fury would have broken her had she not erased those six years preceding the death of the world. The company of other children, industrious mothers in beautiful jewelry, the majestic plan of life…” (48). Lina sorts and selects her past events in order to invent a new self. “She sorted and stored what she dared to recall and eliminated the rest, an activity which shaped her inside and out” (48). On one hand Lina protects Florens and becomes almost her mother, on the other hand Lina shows her clear distrust of Sorrow. Where Florens gets her guiding angel in form of Lina, Sorrow creates her imaginary friend named ‘Twin’. Instead of latching on to another person or to material objects, Sorrow’s loss of family – the result of a pirate’s raid of the ship she lived on – causes her to experience a psychic split.

She did not mind when they called her Sorrow so long as Twin kept using her real name. It was easy to be confused. Sometimes it was the housewife or the sawyer or the sons who needed her; other times Twin wanted company to talk or walk or play. Having two names was convenient since Twin couldn’t be seen by anybody else. So if she were scrubbing clothes or herding geese and heard the name Captain used, she knew it was Twin. But if any voice called “Sorrow,” she knew what to expect. Preferable, of course, was when Twin called from the mill door or whispered up close into her ear. Then she would
quit any chore and follow her identical self. They had met beneath the
surgeon’s hammock in the looted ship. (114)

Twin represents comfort and safety for Sorrow just like blacksmith for
Florens or Jacob for Rebekka. Twin fills void left by Sorrow’s lack of family for
her. Twin takes on a central role in Sorrow’s reality, becoming her “safety, her
entertainment, her guide” (117). Twin materializes in a moment of profound
crisis for Sorrow, who is the lone survivor of a raid upon the pirate ship that has
served as the only home she can remember. With her father, the captain of the
ship, nowhere to be found, Sorrow wanders the destroyed decks, rummaging for
food. Then twin appears and Sorrow says “they have been together ever since”
(115). Together they face the morbid, threatening reality of their circumstances.

The ubiquity of death, destruction, and peril in Sorrow’s
circumstances, as described in this passage is overwhelming: “dead
fish,” “broken mast,” “dead bodies,” “rocky shoreline,” and the threat
of drowning, loom as hazards and also as reminders of Sorrow’s
desolation. Yet, Twin’s presence in this passage provides a lifeline.
Although she is imaginary, Twin functions as a flesh – and – blood
being would: she is Sorrow’s ally in survival. (Jimenez 08)

Twin exacerbates Sorrow’s alienation in part by encouraging her to lie to
and to withhold information about herself from those who attempt to help her,
such as the sawyer’s family, who initially rescued her, and later to the residents
of the Vaark farm. Sorrow’s absurd responses to the questions of these potential
“real life” allies give her audience ample reason to assume that she is “daft,” and
“strange” (49). She says, for example, that “gulls” were her only shipmates, and that “Mermaids. I mean whales” rescued her from the ghost ship (117). Moreover, Twin takes on the role of an autonomous character in the novel: one who is fiercely possessive of Sorrow. This dynamic play out can be seen when Florens first arrives on the farm. Sorrow is pleased to see the new face, but as she reaches out to touch one of Florens’ braids, Twin stops hers and shouts “Don’t! Don’t!” (122). Thus, Sorrow’s reliance upon Twin for “friendship [and] conversation” (121) detracts from her ability to connect meaningfully with those around her, by making their friendship and conversation superfluous. Although Twin is a relatively consistent source of nourishment for Sorrow’s mother hunger, she ultimately compounds Sorrow’s alienation, by causing her to retreat into a world no other soul can enter. This distancing causes Lina to mistrust Sorrow altogether. She believes her to be “bad luck in the flesh” (51) and a “natural curse,” which “dragged misery like a tail” (53). Her mistrust of Sorrow intensifies after the arrival of Florens. Lina becomes more hostile and wishes to protect Florens: “Whenever Sorrow came near, Lina said “Scat,” or sent her on some task that needed doing immediately, all the while making certain everyone else shared the distrust that sparkled in her own eyes” (122). Lina herself is marked as primitive. It is her Native American identity that marks her so through the eyes of white society. She is a Native American whose village is wiped out by an epidemic while she is rescued. Placed under the care of Presbyterians, she is renamed Messalina and is ushered into a new culture.

She never learned where they took the boys, but she was taken to live among kindly Presbyterians… They named her Messalina, just in case, but shortened it to Lina to signal a sliver of hope. Afraid of once more losing shelter, terrified of being alone in the world without family, Lina acknowledged her status as heathen and let herself be
purified by these worthies. She learned that bathing naked in the river was a sin; that plucking cherries from a tree burdened with them was theft; that to eat corn mush with one’s fingers was perverse. That God hated idleness most of all, so staring off into space to weep for a mother or a playmate was to court damnation. Covering oneself in the skin of beasts offended God, so they burned her deerskin dress and gave her a good duffel cloth one. They clipped the beads from her arms and scissored inches from her hair. Although they would not permit her to accompany them to either of the Sunday services they attended, she was included in daily prayers before breakfast, midmorning and evening. But none of the surrender, begging, imploring or praising on her knees took hold because, hard as she fought, the Messalina part erupted anyway and the Presbyterians abandoned her without so much as a murmur of fare well. (45-6)

Remnants of Lina’s Native American culture are embedded in her psyche and cannot be excised. Instead, “she adopts a hybrid culture that mixes aspects of white culture with her own to befit herself for the kind of life that has befallen her” (Roye 216). Toni Morrison beautifully brings out the pathos of her situation: both Lina and beech trees have lived for years on Vaark’s property, but, as she realizes, “You [beech tree] and I, this land is our home… but unlike you I am exile here” (57). Lina is an exile in her home; she is homeless in her own homeland. A great injustice is perpetrated against her when she is uprooted from her native culture and transplanted into a foreign one. Her consequent loss of identity is complete since we never know what her real name is and she cannot remember it. Besides race prejudices and skin colours, it is poverty that keeps Lina in a penniless and has to serve others in order to derive some sustenance. Whether or not Rebekka, her mistress, treats Lina well, the latter
must mutely keep serving. Girls like Lina, Florens, Pecola (*The Bluest Eye*) are viewed by the white society as inferior because of their race, gender and class. However, it becomes interesting when Morrison equally portrays the effects of poverty and grief on white female, Rebekka. David Gates, in his review of *A Mercy* deems Rebekka an “escapee from hell”. She belongs to a white-skinned family in Europe. Her father works as a waterman and her mother works in other’s houses. Growing up in a riotous, poverty – stricken, waterside town, she witnessed crudeness and cruelty, violence and vulgarity. Such atmosphere leaves deep scars upon Rebekka’s psyche. She knows by sixteen that she would be given to any man who offers for her hand. She has limited options to become a servant to a wealthy family, a prostitute, or a wife. She is effectively given to her would-be husband because Jacob sends reimbursements for clothing and other expenses. Although she labors on the farm as the wife of a man with moderate means, she is white and a landowner. Among brown-skinned natives and black slaves, she is the member of a “superior race”. Although she herself has once been virtually sold by her parents, she now holds the power to sell Florens and Sorrow. Her parents though had denied her love, cast her off as an expendable good, abandoned her, but she gets in return a kind, tolerant husband, Jacob. He instantly approves of her, smiling as if “this was what his whole life was about, meeting her at long last” (84). They sequester themselves at their farm, shunning opportunities to build bonds with members of their outer communities. Rebekka’s dependence upon Jacob becomes problematic for her when he is absent; causing her to – literally – lose sentience to the world around her. The wave of loneliness would at times arrest her unexpectedly even during the most mundane moments.

A commanding and oppressive absence. She learned the intricacy of loneliness: the horror of color, the roar of soundlessness and the
menace of familiar objects lying still. When Jacob was away… She might be bending in a patch of radishes, tossing weeds with the skill of a pub matron dropping coins into her apron. Weeds for the stock. Then as she stood in the molten sunlight, pulling the corners of her apron together, the comfortable sounds of the farm would drop. Silence would fall like snow floating around her head and shoulders, spreading outward to wind-driven yet quiet leaves, dangling cowbells, the whack of Lina’s axe chopping firewood nearby. Her skin would flush, then chill. Sound would return eventually, but the loneliness might remain for days. (90-1)

It is Rebekka and Lina who after some time of initial suspicion become fond of each other slowly. They eventually become friends and when “the first infant was born, Lina handled it so tenderly, with such knowing, Rebekka was ashamed of her early fear and pretended she’d never had them” (73). Their class and racial difference are minimised as there is a “focus on building community” (Hooks, *Sister* 154) as they try to create a pleasant environment for them to live in. Both understand that “fraudulent competition was worth nothing on land that demanding” (51) and they “were company for each other” (51). In order to work the land they have no time to think about their differences, they have to stick together to overcome the hardships imposed by the land and weather.

They became friends. Not only because somebody had to pull the wasp sting from the other’s arm. Not only because it took two to push the cow away from the fence. Not only because one had to hold the head while the other one tied the trotters. Mostly because neither knew precisely what they were doing or how. Together, by trial and error
they learned: what kept the foxes away, how and when to handle and spread manure; the difference between lethal and edible and the sweet taste of timothy grass; the features of meased swine… (51)

In the beginning of the novel there is uncertainty, indeterminacy. The narrative voice sets up a host of unanswered questions “One question is who is responsible? Another is can you read?” (01). Though it becomes clear that the narrator is Florens talking about “a minha mãe” (01). Florens is taken to Vaark’s New England Homestead as settlement for a debt. Though, she keeps on questioning this act of her mother who urges Vaark to take her instead of the boy who needs nursing. Florens joins the small holding worked by Jacob Vaark’s wife, Rebekka, and her unpaid workers, Native Lina, the foundling Sorrow, and leased labourers. Her life at this homestead is narrated by Florens and it is through Florens that Morrison asks questions that are as much about the present moment as they are about the past.

Florens’ “telling” (like the map on the novel’s frontispiece, in which native names are written by European hand) is hybrid text. It is a Portuguese – inflected Pidgin English that only colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade could have produced. The non-Anglo nature of her language works to counter Anglo centric dominance in the canonical narratives of early America. It testifies both to her oppression, and, though the fact that it is a written as well as a spoken account, to the literary wherein lies the potential for her freedom and escape. (Roynon 81)

Florens, projects her feelings of abandonment by her mother into a desire for the blacksmith, a freed black, who comes to build a gate for Vaark’s
mansion. Similar to what happens to Sula (Sula 1973), but in a much more intense manner this love becomes obsessive as Florens cannot live without him. Lina, who cares for Florens as a mother almost, warn her against the attraction. So “Lina knew she was the only one alert to the breakdown stealing toward them. The only one who foresaw the disruption, the shattering a free black man would cause” (59). Lina’s warning, “You are one leaf on his tree” (59) does not affect Florens. Lina tells Florens an allegorical story of an eagle mother and a wandering traveler. As the story goes, an eagle has just laid her eggs and is on heightened alert for any threats to the safety of her young. A traveler stops to look out on the valley he sees before him. As he gazes at the tremendous beauty of the valley, he laughs, saying “This is perfect. This is mine” (60). The mother eagle hears a threat implicit in his tone, and “she swoops down to claw away his laugh and his unnatural sound” (60). He, in turn, strikes her, sending her hurtling down in an eternal freefall. When Florens inquires as to the fate of her unhatched eggs, Lina replies that “They hatch alone” (61). Florens, on edge about the baby bird’s fate, asks if they live. “We have,” Lina says (61), implying that the baby eagles in the allegory represent Florens, Lina, and other diasporic people who, like them, have been orphaned by colonialism. In contemporary context, A Mercy, implies that modern, twentieth century alienation was planted long ago, by the familial ruptures prevalent in the seventeenth century.

Florens association with blacksmith derives from the fact that she associates with him the safety and refuge of the family and home that she lost when her mother abandoned her. Indeed, she sees his black skin – his “outside dark” (113) – as proof of the authenticity of their connection. In a passage addressed to him, Florens describes what she conceives of as her “inside dark” (113). She asks the blacksmith if this inner darkness is why her mother abandoned her:
“Is this dying mine alone? Is the clawing feathery thing the only life in me? You will tell me. You have the outside dark as well. And when I see you and fall into you I know I am alive. Sudden it is not like before when I am always in fright. I am not afraid of anything now. The sun’s going leaves darkness behind and the dark is me. Is we. Is my home. (113)

The sense of safety and refuge she feels at the mere sight of the blacksmith is reflected when she states that as she “falls into” the blacksmith, the fear – “fright is gone” (113). Blacksmith becomes her safety net. She collapses their two identities into one because, she says, they share the same inner/outer darkness. Florens wishes to consume him with her eyes forever. She confesses, “My eyes not my stomach are the hungry parts of me. There will never be enough time to look at how you move… Before you know I am in the world I am already kill by you” (35-6). Florens’ worship of the blacksmith is reflected in the way she imagines him – god like – as he performs his work. “Your arm goes to strike iron. You drop to one knee. You bend. You stop to pour water first on the iron then down your throat” (35-6). Florens struggles to control this involuntary worship, running to the shed to escape, but “Nothing stops it” (35). Blacksmith consumes her and she realizes that he has become so large in her mind that there is no room for the rest of the world which has become void. Toni Morrison aptly shows how Florens projects her fate of abandonment by her mother into a desire for the blacksmith. Similar to what happens to Sula, but in a much more intense manner, this love becomes obsessive as Florens cannot live without him.
But then you bathe my journey from my face and arms and give me stew. It needs salt. It pieces of rabbit are thick and tender. My hunger is sharp but my happiness is more. I cannot eat much. We talk of many things and I don’t say what I am thinking. That I will stay. That when you return from healing Mistress whether she is live or no I am here with you always. Never never without you… With you my body is pleasure is safe is belonging. I can never not have you have me. (134-5)

Florens’ desire for blacksmith is set on slippery grounds. She wants him only to herself because of the fear of abandonment and so she makes him her owner. She wants to be with the blacksmith in any possible way because she does not desire to be alone again. As explained and becomes true in the case of Florens, “The appropriation of the other to one’s own desires, leads to violence” (Wyatt 482). Florens wants to fulfil her desire of having someone love her unconditionally and as she tries to control the blacksmith and who he cares for, it leads only to violence. Vaark, her master, dies from smallpox precisely as his new mansion is finished and blacksmith already departed, Florens once again gets a chance to fulfil her desire. Rebekka contracts the disease and Florens is sent to bring back the blacksmith (the love of her life), because he had previously cured Sorrow of the same condition. Her physical journey to find blacksmith is full of trials which she could not have foreseen. She walks “among the chestnut trees lining the road. Some already showing leaf hold their breath until the snow melts” (39). The condition becomes all the more hard she holds, “…one arm out in front and go slow to not stumble and fall” (39). Her journey faces trials like looming bears and finding shelters in the darkness. The only thing that keeps her going is her only hope of reaching blacksmith soon. She moves north where the sapling bends into the earth and “then west to you” (39).
Her journey reflects her sufferance physically and psychologically. Florens seeks refuge overnight that turns disastrous. She is accused of being “the Black Man’s minion” (111).

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. (109)

Being black, Florens is automatically associated with the evil, the dark. The Separatists who have had no or few previous encounters with an “Afric” consider her or understand her as an “agent for the devil” (Roynon 81). Florens’ encounter with the religious fanatics marks her as one from the Lucifer or Satan. Morrison’s use of biblical analogies highlights the racial prejudices. The little girl in the group of religious understanding or interpreters cries out in terror at the sight of Florens and her black skin. The elders too demonize Florens and her blackness as a sign that she serves the devil. “The little girl is back… A woman’s voice asks would Satan write a letter. Lucifer is all deceit and trickery says another” (111). Morrison compelling text puts the wheels of racism in motion in this colonial America. Being black Florens is automatically associated with the negative, the dark, the evil. She presents the letter given to her by her mistress Rebekka, stating her as a confirmed legal slave. Florens as stated by Rebekka is “owned by me and can be knowne by a burne mark in the palm of her left hand” (110). The final degradation of Florens as a woman, as being
slave comes when Florens is checked physically for being a human being and not a minion of the Satan or evil.

They point me to a door that opens onto a storeroom and there, standing among carriage boxes and a spinning wheel, they tell me to take off my clothes. Without touching they tell me what to do. To show them my teeth, my tongue. They frown at the candle burn on my palm, the one you kissed to cool. They look under my arms, between my legs. They circle me, lean down to inspect my feet. Naked under their examination I watch for what is in their eyes. No hate is there or scare or disgust but they are looking at me my body across distances without recognition. Swine look at me with more connection when they raise their heads from the trough. The women look away from my eyes the way you say I am to do with the bears so they will not come close to love and play. Finally they tell me to dress and leave the room shutting the door behind them. I put on my clothes. I hear the quarreling. The little girl is back, not sobbing now but saying it scares me it scares me. A woman’s voice asks would Satan write a letter. Lucifer is all deceit and trickery says another. But a woman’s life is at stake says the Widow, who will the Lord punish then? The man’s voice booms. We will relay this to the others he says. We will study on it, consult and pray and return with our answer. It is not clear it seems whether or no I am the Black Man’s minion. (110-11)

For Florens, the message is again rejection; a repudiation of her black body by strangers and the experience is heightened by its repetition of the original maternal rejection. Although on this second occasion it is a repudiation of her
black body by strangers. The “intensity of the experience is heightened by its repetition of the original maternal rejection” (Wyatt 135). The same kind of rejection again Florens faces when she reaches blacksmith’s house. Her joy and relief at seeing him again is visceral. She “trembles” and loses “fear” that she may never again know the “welcoming smile” (133). Florens hungers for the blacksmith and is being fed, at last. But her feasting joy is interrupted when the blacksmith points to a little boy “a foundling” (134), whom he has taken in. The happening repeats in the sense that Florens was abandoned by her mother in place of the boy (her brother) whom her mother held on to. Second time it is another girl who holds on to her mother screaming. For her “both times are full of danger” (134) and she feel expelled. The boy with blacksmith is ‘Malaik’-father dead, mother unknown. Immediately Florens is brought back to the memory of the primal moment of her abandonment. What she refers to her first “expel” (134) is in fact her recognition of her predicament. What heightens her fear of being, again, not chosen – again ousted – is how Malaik seems already to possess and be possessed by the blacksmith. She feels, “I worry as the boy steps closer to you. How you offer and he owns your forefinger. As if he is your future. Not me” (134). The lack of explanation of her mother’s actions and choices creates distrust in Florens. She carries with her, her distrust, throughout the novel, “eventually ending in a violent reaction toward a child she views as a competitor” (Putnam 32). Florens is worried about Malaik who receives attention from the blacksmith, because she wants to be the only one cared for. Though Malaik is a boy that blacksmith takes in temporarily because the child’s father is working, Florens feels insecure and rejected. After blacksmith departs to heal Rebekka, the boy and Florens are left waiting together, each uncomfortable with the other. Florens starts to remember her mother as she lays down for bed and associates Malaik with her little brother whom her mother had kept. She remembers her last encounter with her mother: “Minha mãe leans at the door holding her little boy’s hand, my shoes in her pocket” (135). Florens
becomes restless at the “small creaking” of Malaik, who she knows is watching her with “Eyes big, wondering, and cold” (135). Malaik becomes a projection of her brother, and she transfers her anger to him because he is being protected by the blacksmith, like her brother was by her mother: “He is silent but the hate is in his eyes is loud. He wants my leaving. This cannot happen. I feel the clutch inside. This expel can never happen again” (135). Florens is traumatised by having to leave her mother and dreads that she may lose her love again, again being rejected in a favour of a boy. She is overwhelmed with anger, fear and the desire to have the blacksmith only to herself. Consequently, a healthy relationship between them becomes unattainable because of her insecurity and obsession. It is because Malaik, as seen by Florens, has usurped Florens’ place. His holding the blacksmith’s hand suggests that the blacksmith will choose the child for his future. Florens acts the part of the jealous sibling. She maliciously – and childishly – hides the boy’s doll, the transitional object he clings for security. And when he cries loudly at the loss, and then louder in his fear of Florens, she pulls his arm till she hears the shoulder crack.

The boy quits the lane. He comes in but will neither eat nor talk. We stare at each other across the table. He does not blink. Nor me. I know he steals Sir’s boots that belong to me. His fingers cling the doll. I think that must be where his power is. I take it away and place it on a shelf too high for him to reach. He screams and screams. Tears falling. On bleeding feet I run outside to keep from hearing. He is not stopping. Is not. A cart goes by. The couple in it glance but do not greet or pause. Finally the boy is silent and I go back in. The doll is not on the shelf. It is abandon in a corner like a precious child no person wants… Seeing me the boy returns to screaming and that is when I clutch him. I am trying to stop him and hurt him. That is why I pull his arm. To make him stop. Stop it. And yes I do hear the
shoulder crack but the sound is small… He screams screams then faints. (137-8)

Blacksmith’s return becomes the most traumatic time for Florens. His rejection, the final one, pushes her to the extreme. On his arrival he finds Malaik collapsed on the floor with blood on his mouth. He refuses to listen to Florens and her explanations, and calls her a slave whose “head is empty… body is wild” (139). According to him Florens is “nothing but wilderness” with “no constraint,” “no mind” (139). Florens knows she is at fault but is traumatized by his immediate assumption that she is the culprit and his knocking her “away without certainty of what is true” (138). Blacksmith is not ready to understand her vices as the vices of a human being who has been oppressed politically and economically both. He, himself a freed man, defines Florens, an enslaved black woman, as an absolute negative, a mere nothing. His inability to forgive her reveals not only the rising ideologies of racism but also “the persevering historical transmutations of the metaphysical language of racism” (Karavanta 735). Hartman aptly demonstrates Scenes of Subjection the prolepsis of how “the texture of freedom,” following the abolition of slavery, will be “laden with vestiges of slavery” (Hartman 116). His cruelty that leaves her with “no words of sorrow (138) for the wounds he has caused her. This shows Florens that to be free will mean to be forced to lay claim to freedom within the “economy of racial production” (Hartman 234). Whether Florens has actually killed or simply injured Malaik is not clear. But the blacksmith dismisses her immediately. He does not ask for her side of story. Her rejection is absolute and he condemns her. That is why maybe Florens chooses to write it. One way it explains that “threats may alter one’s perception” (Herman 34). This might have happen with Florens, who feels powerless and is overtaken by anger and fear. Florens is not portrayed as violent or dangerous, but as a lost woman suffering the consequences of the
brutalities of slavery and therefore “Trauma can be disorienting and one’s emotions and thoughts can fly out of control” (Herman 60-1). Florens is unable to cope with this second abandonment by a loved one in her life. Her memories and present realities merge as she starts to lose control over herself. Florens becomes disconnected from reality and is trapped in her thoughts of her traumatic experience. On her return from blacksmith’s house she encloses herself in the big house that Jacob had built and she starts to write on the walls. She writes compulsively by intermingling memories and experiences in an attempt to make sense of her life.

It is possible that the snake heads ending in flowers that the blacksmith forges for Jacob’s gate are a tribute to Florens, whose name is the Latin present participle meaning both “flowering” and “flourishing” (Roynon 85). Florens in her declaration, “I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full,” (159) suggests that she has gone wild but is also flourishing. She has survived her epic journey through “pathless night” (03), including not being raped, to her surprise, by a group of Native boys on horseback. She has also survived being scrutinized by the Separatists. And therefore after her return, the text that she writes and the house become one for Florens. The words thus disperse throughout the world. Having addressed the narration so far to the blacksmith, Florens directs the final writing back to her mother. It highlights the failure of communication between mother and child. And process that Florens goes through can be attributed to her rejection – as a child, as a lover and as a non-evil embody. Shoshanna Felman argues that her state is the:

Impasse confronting those whom cultural conditioning has deprived of the very means of protest or self-affirmation… [it] is a request for help… [a] help-seeking behaviour is itself part of female conditioning,
ideologically inherent in the behavioural pattern and in the dependent and helpless role assigned to the woman. (Felman 07)

The voice of Florens’ mother speaking for the first time is the voice that closes the novel. Addressing her words to an absent Florens, she explains that her motive for giving her away to Jacob was the certainty that she would be spared of being raped and also expresses her belief in literacy as defense. In one present tense paragraph and one past, the mother recalls her life in Africa and her capture. This is notable for being Morrison’s first depiction of action on the African continent and for its challenge to the oversimplified polarization between black victimhood and white oppression or to a straight equation between race and slavery.

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. (162).

* A Mercy * unveils the disremembering of the history with its violent beginnings. Morrison’s novel employs the history of this intercultural, “messy” (Karavanta 740) before. It is the depiction of the time when the communities are not yet strictly organised as racial, ethnic, and religious reconstructions. The
narrative of the American nation is constructed on the forgetting of the history of communities of dissenting and disparate elements, and how resisting to this forgetting endangers an alternative way of attending to history. Therefore the journey of the slaves, the black men and women becomes very centralized here in the words by Florens’ mother. As she describes the process of her enslavement, the black-washing of her specific identity into a commodity, universalised blackness is particularly striking. “I was negrita. Everything. Language, dress, gods, dance, habits, decoration, song – all of it cooked together in the color of my skin. So it was a black that I was purchased by Senhor, taken out of the cane and shipped north to his tobacco plants” (163).

* A Mercy* brings us the poignant pictures of the traumatized lives of men and women. While the slaves in the text are not all African American, many reviewers continue to use term slave as a racial signifier, assuming that when they describe Florens as a slave this communicates her blackness. One reviewer alludes to Sorrow as a slave, and Willard and Scully as “white slaves” suggesting the need for racial clarification if a slave is white. By and large, the reviewers of *A Mercy* do not separate the text from its moment of publication. While “reviewers such as Lenora Todaro and Jenifer Reese describe the text as a “creation myth,” many others see it as a look back at the past that is meant to tell us something about the future. (Cantiello 165)

Toni Morrison’s deep concern for the deprived and disrupted black women is reflected across the spectrum of her work. Be these black females the Florenses and Sorrows of the seventeenth century or the Pecolas and Claudias of the twentieth century, their feminine vulnerability is more often than not cruelly
taken advantage of. Sorrow is an easy target for men’s lasciviousness; Pecola is raped by her own father and Sula is ostracized by her own community, Sethe suffers at the hands of the boys and the schoolteacher. Besides their sexual identity, factors like “race, poverty, and family upbringing play a crucial role in obstructing these girls’ progress” (Roye 224). Each of these Morrison’s characters act as an open indictment of the society that remains blind to the perpetration of injustices. Toni Morrison deliberately brings marginal figures to the center of attention, thereby recuing them and their tragic tales from a collective blindness. Critics have widely noted and appraised Morrison’s endeavour at bringing black (and/or colored) females to the front. Morrison’s ideology crosses frontiers of race, class, culture, ethnicity, continents, and centuries. The racist ideology prevaricate the black females of that particular time and in fact all of them are victimized by the society. By and large the late seventeenth century plot of *A Mercy* invites twenty first century readers to consider a sectarian America as its racial divide infolded. Florens experience as a slave illustrates the complexity of categorization in the time period. Florens with her tender feet represent both the risk of and the resistance to slavery. Her journey to find the blacksmith, his rejection of her, and her return to the farm, compose the text’s putative plot arc. For Florens the journey also entails a transition into a fully embodied slave state; she walks back without shoes and her last words are “[T]he soles of my feet are hard a cypress” (159). Florens’ trajectory toward full enslavement is both internal and external, under her control and yet not so. When the blacksmith rejects her, he frames her enslavement as her own doing: she has become a slave to him, to her impulses. Like the presence of free blacks in the colonies in the mid-1600s the blacksmith’s place in the novel and his rejection of Florens “subvert[s] the logic of racial slavery” (Berlin 38).
Morrison insists that Florens and her enslavement is also a function of her blackness, presaging the linkage of slavery and blackness in the near future. Morrison describes the hardening of Florens’ racial classification on the same journey, when Florens is staying with a kind white widow and her daughter. The attention paid by the village people to her body and especially to her skin color makes Florens aware of racial difference for the first time. It is from here that Morrison illustrates how Florens, her body, will become the most significant racial identifier in the eighteenth century, specifically in the context of slavery. Florens links her humiliation to her “outside dark” (113) or her black skin. When she later sees the unrecognizing gaze in the eyes of her mistress, she realizes that the tenuous bond between them has been broken; Rebekka now sees her as property and has “put up for her sale” (157). If Florens and her experiences explore the process of racialization, the recollections of her mother, who has already been victimised by the machinations of “New World racialism” (Cantiello 172) illustrates the results. Barbados, where Florens’ mother was brought as a slave, was of the earliest places in the New World to implement “a racialised slave code” (Roediger 10) and was the island that most influenced the development of slavery in North America. Although the text gestures toward a multiracial America, Morrison and the readers know what will happen with the institutionalization of slavery in the United States is the erasure of this multiracial past in favour of a black/white binary. In case of Sorrow, her presence engages the reader in a process of racial identification of appearance and ancestry, both of which are ambiguous in her case. By refusing to provide conventional racial markers, Morrison underlines how reliant on them the reader has become. Sorrow is not depicted clearly as black or white. She is “mongrelized” (118). She is described as having “red hair, black teeth, recurring neck boils and a look in those over-lashed sliver-gray eyes” (51-2). Morrison uses colours and textures to indicate racial mixing: one is even tempted to read the gray eyes as a pointed reminder of the mixing of black and white. Toni
Morrison’s use of the word “mongrelized” provides no additional information beyond the fact of intermixed. It is towards the end of Sorrow’s narrative, that she renames herself “Complete” (132). While this decision marks her position in the narrative, as Morrison insists she has crafted a complete character in spite of and perhaps because of her ambiguous and complicated racial and slave location. Morrison’s intentional use of keeping a character’s race ambiguous is often questioned and for which she answers:

“I’m aware that if somebody says. “A man walked in the room, “you know he’s White. Why? Because if they’re talking about a Black man, they say, “A Black man walked into the room.” So that constant identification, constant alienation, constant language that singles you out, it reinforces this notion of fear and the other and the alien and the foreign. When you think about the language, the discourse about race, that’s when as a writer you think, *Suppose I just take it out? Now what are you going to do?”* (Morrison, “Have Mercy!”)

Structuring *A Mercy* on the basis of multiracial, multi-culturism, Morrison shows how the characters develop a new kind of racial and cultural relations shaped by their interdependence and mutual need. They develop kindness and mercy and also show compassion to one another. On a surface level Jacob condemns slavery but he too becomes involved in it. On the deeper analysis we come to know about his kindness towards Florens, his mercy in taking her away from the degraded Senhor. And this act of mercy is of paramount importance, as it especially hoists him up to the first place of those who break racial barriers in his society. He even “behaved as though the blacksmith was his brother” (58). This too indicates his affinity and kindness in spite of racial differences.
Blacksmith heals Rebekka of her illness. Lina and Sorrow too are devoted to their Mistress. Lina’s Native Indian roots help the Mistress as she provides the herbs to relive Rebekka of her pain. The collective identity, dynamism of community, held the earlier American nation. They created a melting pot society with mutual understanding and redefining their ways. *A Mercy* thus also traces back the history of the United States. It deeply plunges the reader into the roots of the construction of the nation with the coexistence of the many ethnic groups, namely African, Native Indians and Europeans. Toni Morrison uses the narrative structure in such a way that it allows the multiple narrators to relate its plot in turn. Therefore, to make the reader know their individual sufferance, Morrison uses polyphony, a narrative device which allows characters to express her/his own history. Accordingly Morrison points out the construction of self-identity or individual self, which is one of the most important factors of multi-culturalism in colonial America. It is the plurality of consciousness which resulted into the construction of the American identity itself.

Morrison has said that because the sweep of history is too large, especially the sweep of American slavery, she concentrates on single characters within the historical moment to convey the specificities of that moment. Morrison’s plotting of *A Mercy* makes the case with Jacob Vaark’s accumulated household and conversion to investing indirectly in the slave trade what history bears out: economic expediency led the shift to non-white slavery. (Jennings 648)

*A Mercy* ends on a note of heartfelt pleading to be heard, the speaker’s word appear to join Florens and her dispersed text, falling “out in the world” (159). Florens’ writing power, fully suggests a subject of inside history. The
novel opens and closes with the thick history and uncountable stories of the transoceanic trajectories of slaves, gold diggers, runaways, exiles, refugees and immigrants. Mother of Florens crosses the ocean, a crossing that echoes Rebekka’s voyage where she forms temporary affiliation with other “exiled thrown-away women” (80). In other words the novel is embedded in the history of expropriation, exploitation and colonisation. Instead of repeating the history of this loss only, Morrison counter-writes it by inventing the stories and thus alluding to the histories of the constituencies.

To most people history and fiction are contrasting words. History, they are told, is an account of what really happened; fiction is a literary work portraying imaginary characters and events. What could be more different? Yet the historian and the novelist have more in common than these definitions would suggest. At the most obvious level each has to have some of the other’s quality. The historian who is a mere gruber for facts and has no imagination is seriously handicapped. He must select his material; he must give it a meaningful order and analysis; he must convey its color and drama to the reader. Such tasks require imagination – properly disciplined and responsible imagination, to be sure. Similarly, the novelist who has nothing but imagination will be a mere spinner of tales; the serious author tries to convey to his reader what really might have happened – what, in the novelist is experience, and is true. (Wolfe 330)

Thus Morrison’s stature gets an enlargement of scope and influence as a writer, as a novelist, which captures the universality and depth of creative vision. She has transformed the transformed the American literary landscape
with her firm presence established in the African American literary tradition. Morrison as a revisionist of history thus maps the quest for racial equality, individuality and consideration as human beings. Morrison’s black female characters struggle throughout their life to achieve this, though they meet their ends differently. Black women indeed strive to attain their identity in the midst of glorified failures, sorrows, and sexual bestial treatments. They fill the vacuum created by the black men through their desertions. Their tireless efforts illuminate the untold suffering and history at large. Hence, Morrison’s fiction is often black but never bleak. On one hand there is disrupted lives depicted but on the other hand there is brave endeavours delineated which constitute not only message of hope but also an agenda of action. Critics have widely noted and appraised this. If The Bluest Eye and A Mercy have traumatic characters like Pecola and Sorrow, so do Sula and Beloved have characters like Sula and Sethe who celebrate their self in their own ways. Morrison therefore portrays a special kind of knowledge of American literary canon. It is in “a world in whose eyes black females like herself were insignificant to the extent of being “invisible” shaped her identity as a reader. As a writer, she decided to shape her own world of fiction” (Roye 212).
REFERENCES


