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Free Slaves and Enslaved Free: Toni Morrison's Chiastic Fable of Freedom in *A Mercy*

Keywords

African American fiction, literary tropes (chiasmus), fictive rewriting of history, shifting meaning of freedom, slavery, Toni Morrison

Introduction

Published in 2008, *A Mercy* can be regarded a prequel to Toni Morrison's other books in the sense that it is a part of her wider project of re-writing history of African Americans in an imaginative way. Set in 1682, in what is yet to be called America, Morrison takes the reader further back in time than in any of her other novels. The New World in the late 17th century is the time when the institution of slavery is beginning to appear in North America. It is also a place and time when notions of modern American standards of individuality and self-sufficiency begin to emerge. Slavery, indentured labor, servitude represent different degrees of enslavement and freedom. Moreover, neither of these categories is tied to race as yet. The novel surveys the shifting meanings of slavery, indentured labor, servitude, and freedom in relation to race. Morrison's reason behind going back to this era in particular, according to her 2008 NPR interview, is that she "wanted to separate race from slavery" and "to see what was it like or what it might have been like to be a slave but not at without being raced because I couldn't believe that was the natural state of people who were a born and of people who came here, that it had to be constructed, planted, institutionalized and legalized" (Morrison 2008).

Morrison's project of returning to the history of race relations in *A Mercy* has held the attention of academics and scholars since its publication in 2008. As Kovács writes, Morrison "has been rewriting the history of African Americans imaginatively in her novels" as an attempt to "create counter-histories" to "the official history of African Americans" which "has been written from the perspective of whites so far" (Kovács 2019, 43). Valerie Babb considers the novel to be written as a response to the US "origins narrative" and that Morrison's main objective is to allude to "prenational documents that demarcated lines of race, gender, and class in the cause of privileging an ideology whiteness" (Babb 2011, 148). Laurie Vickroy highlights the ways "acquisition and religious rationalizations aid the proliferation of slavery and the homogenization of American culture" in Morrison's novel (Vickroy 2019, 66). Quan elaborates on Morrison's reliance on "the architecture, the inscription, and the body" as three possible media to showcase and remember atrocities of slavery as an institution (Quan 2019, 555). This paper is also an attempt to shed light on Morrison's imaginative project of rewriting history in *A Mercy*. It focuses on the ways in which the main characters of the novel perceive their status in terms of 'freedom' in seventeenth century colonial North America.

The characters share different attitudes towards what freedom is to them as the meanings of freedom and enslavement are overturned in the novel's rhetoric. Florens and Lina, a teenage black slave and a servant native woman respectively, believe that freedom comes from inside. It is related to their perspective of life and the way they see themselves in relations to others. In contrast, Jacob Vaarks, a white farmer and trader, and his wife, Rebecca, attach the meanings

of freedom to their material possessions. Another attitude to freedom is that of a free African American blacksmith in the novel, especially in relation to Willard and Skully, two indentured white male servants. Despite being free, the black man is reluctant to display his superiority towards the servants related to the racial differences between them.

The paper sheds light on the dynamic relation of freedom and enslavement in the novel through a specific trope Morrison deploys towards the end of the novel, a chiasmus of freedom. The trope is used by Florens recalling one of her mother's tale "The Ass in the Lion's Skin" which relates how the ass in the lion's skin cannot defeat the lion in the ass's skin. Florens takes the tale to tell the story of the enslaved (ass) who are free inside (lion). The ABBA structure of the formulation (ass, lion, lion, ass) highlights the possibility of turning over the slave-free relation. Although the mother tells the tale to warn Florens: pretending to be free does not grant one freedom and what one sees is usually different from the reality of things, Morrison's use of this chiasmic structure in the novel poses the question of what notions of freedom the specific characters embody. The trope showcases that freedom comes from inside first and that the power of language can help the enslaved characters feel free from within and have a more reconciling attitude towards themselves. In turn, this same logic results in the vulnerability of the free characters. The paper surveys the representations of the fluid relation between freedom and slavery in Morrison's novel: it investigates the various experiences of freedom performed by different characters that follow the logic of the chiasmus. The first section elaborates on Morrison's chiasmus and its relation to and problematization of the concept of freedom. The second section investigates the female characters of the novel from the perspective of how they define freedom for themselves from the inside or the outside, while the third one examines the character of the free black blacksmith in comparison to other, free or indentured, white male characters of the novel.

1. Morrison's Chiastic Rhetoric of Freedom and Enslavement

Morrison relies on the trope of chiasmus in her imaginative exploration of notions of freedom available at the dawn of slavery in North America in the seventeenth-century. Doing that, she relies both on a potent device used for collapsing oppositions and a figure that has been widely deployed in African American fiction.

One of the many stories narrated by the mother of the colored slave girl Florens is that of "The Ass in the Lion's Skin." The story conveys the mother's understanding of what it means to feel free from within, despite being enslaved. Morrison figuratively alludes to Aesop's *Fables* to present this concept of freedom and enslavement in *A Mercy*. Aesop's *Fables* best known as a collection of morality tales and written by a former Greek slave circa 6th century B.C., are myths and allegories portraying mainly animals in human-like situations known as animism and Aesop being a slave recorded tales of diverse oral traditions which indicates that the tale could be of an African origin (Aesop 2011).

In an attempt to attach sense to her mother's decision of abandoning her, Florens contemplates her mother's story of the "The Ass in the Lion's Skin": "You say you see slaves freer than free men. One is a lion in the skin of an ass. The other is an ass in the skin of a lion" (Morrison 2008, 160). In this expression, the slave is a lion hidden beneath the skin of a donkey, while the other, the free person, is a donkey hiding beneath the skin of a lion, while the expression has an ABBA structure. Chris Baldick defines chiasmus as a figure of speech with an ABBA structure "by which the order of the terms in the first of two parallel clauses is reversed in the second. This may involve a repetition of the same words" (Baldick 2001, 38). Morrison's allusion to the donkey and the lion through the tale is a chiasmus because of the repetition of the two

words "ass" and "lion" and the reversal of the roles of the free and the slave. The slave is freed, and the free is enslaved by means of the rhetorical trope.

The most famous example of the use of a chiasmus in an African American slave narrative is Fredrick Douglass's formulation in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (1845). In his pursuit of freedom, Douglass fights back his abusive white overseer and having won the fight, eventually informs his readers: "You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man." (Douglass 1986, 107) The ABBA structure of the trope focuses attention on the overarching theme of the narrative: the story of individual freedom. Though Douglass's focus is both on his manhood and his self-esteem, the trope also implies Douglass's intellectual power. His eloquent and articulate use of language equals his strong and masculine physique and will to freedom both intellectual and physical. In other words, he preserves and manufactures his masculinity in his powerful chiasmus which impresses the reader as much as his physical power and determination.

It is also important to point out that Morrison relies on the chiastic animal imagery of a *folk tale* in the novel. Henry Louis Gates adapts the basic features of African animal tales into a theory of African American meaning making in his seminal book, *The Signifying Monkey*. According to Gates, recurring animal characters of the African oral folk tradition represent ways of communication available for African American slaves in slave narratives. In these animal tales, the roles of the free and the enslaved are reversed in the form of verbal communication between animals, such as a monkey, a lion, an elephant and other animals in Gates's book (Gates Jr. 1998, 56). Through a language of "signifyin(g)" which is a form of African-American communication and socializing, the monkey overpowers the lion in its sharp use of the language of mimicry and mockery and due to the lion's inability to differentiate between the "poles" of "signification" and "meaning" in the monkey's tricks (Gates Jr. 1998, 55). Similarly, the slave is empowered, and the free is overpowered in Douglass's narrative through action and speech.

Morrison's method of relying on a chiasmic structure in a folk tale in *A Mercy* is similar to Gates's adaptation of African animal tales for the more general use of theorizing. The allusion to the oral fable in *A Mercy* can be read in two general ways. Firstly, it can be comprehended as part of Morrison's constant references to traditional African folktales and myths in her writing (Kovács 2016, 43). Lars Eckstein argues that Morrison adopts such techniques in her writing in order to create her "unique sound" (the combination of oral and written narrative traditions). For instance, the main theme of *Song of Solomon*, her 1977 novel, is "rooted in folk orality: namely, the legend of the flying Africans" (Ecksein 2006, 180).

Secondly, this folk story serves to remind the weak that being sensible can provide a means by which they can succeed against the powerful, the enslaved can resist oppression. The cerebral dimension of the story is one that inspires the person towards more practical ways of perceiving their status in society. Freedom can be psychological not only physical and geographical, as Kovács shows, and "the psychological movement from seeing one's self as free psychologically is presented together with a religious idea of freedom or conversion, and political ideas of freedom as well" (Kovács 2018). By this token, the transforming nature of Morrison's chiastic fable allows the characters to perceive themselves as being free on a psychological level, it is a belief that comes from within characters and it intersects with their gender and race.

2. Free-Inside Women of color and Slave-Inside White Women

Morrison's chiasmus can be utilized as an approach to analyze the characters of the novel from the perspective of their changing relations to freedom. The plethora of female characters represent a flux of relations.

Rebecca, the mistress of the farm Florens is sold to, seems to be more fragile than Lina, the Native American servant woman working as Rebecca's main servant. Rebecca even becomes dependent on Lina as the story progresses. At the outset, Rebecca gains her power from her status as the wife of a plantation owner, Jacob Vaarks, and a mother. However, when her three children die, followed by the death of her husband, her friendliness towards Lina turns to hostility as her last attempt to conceal her fragility.

> Confined to bed now, her question was redirected. "And me? How do I look? What lies in my eyes now? Skull and crossbones? Rage? Surrender?" All at once she wanted it—the mirror Jacob had given her which she had silently rewrapped and tucked in her press. It took a while to convince her, but when Lina finally understood and fixed it between her palms, Rebekka winced. "Sorry," she murmured. "I'm so sorry." Her eyebrows were a memory, the pale rose of her cheeks collected now into buds of flame red. She traveled her face slowly, gently apologizing. "Eyes, dear eyes, forgive me. Nose, poor mouth. Poor, sweet mouth, I'm sorry. Believe me, skin, I do apologize. Please. Forgive me." (Morrison 2008, 94)

Observing herself in the mirror, Rebecca's skin reminds her of the traumatic experiences of her life. No matter how well she can display her power (of the lion), her body remembers the painful memories of her past and reminds her of her frailty as being displaced in a world that she is familiar with the least. In Rebecca's case, enslavement is related to her shame towards her body. It is a chronic pain that extends from her failure to be a mother back to her early repressed life in England.

Lina, on the contrary, acts freer than her mistress, Rebecca, in most of the story. She experiences freedom in the sense that she is spontaneous and remains uncivilized by the white villagers, she lives her life in close proximity to nature. Despite Rebecca's constant attempts to overpower and discriminate against Lina, she cannot reach Lina's reconciliation about her status and the borderline between mistress and slave is obfuscated.

The concept of reversing the roles of the free and slave can be applied to Florens, the protagonist of the novel, too. Florens achieves a relative reconciliation with her status as an enslaved black woman by relying on the possibility of chiasmic role reversal. Florens, the main narrator, is seen in the novel to be haunted by her mother's act of giving up on her. However, what Florens takes to be an act of giving up is ironically an act of mercy. By selling her to Jacob Vaark, a Dutch trader and farmer, her mother aims at saving her from being sexually assaulted by D'Ortega, their slaver in Maryland. Naomi Morgenstern suggests that this scene resonates with the mother-daughter separation scenes in Morrison's *Beloved.* Both Florens and Beloved share the same feeling of being abandoned by their mothers (2014, 16). Florens shifts between narrating two stages of her life almost in parallel: her life as a teenager being in a relationship with an African American blacksmith at the present is marred by her life as a child being rejected by her biological mother. The 16-year-old Florens continuously reflects on this primal scene that has been haunting her since she was eight. To compensate for the lack of maternal bond in her life, Florens recalls some of her mother's advice provided in terms of stories in which she follows as a base in the conduct of her relationships with other characters in the novel. One of these tales is the story of "The Lion in the Ass's Skin" thorough which she can identify herself as a lion.

The subversive nature of the fable allows the enslaved, as it is the case with Florens, a tool of escape from the idea of being racially inferior and, thus, a way of reconciling with herself. In *Posthuman Blackness and the Black Female Imagination*, Kristen Lillvis condemns the "institution of slavery" as the main reason behind the mother-daughter separation, resulting in Florens's inability to gain "a relational identity." Florens grows up with a shaken identity as a consequence of "the ongoing presence of racial oppression and other discourses" (2017, 33). For this reason, Morri-

son provides a counter discourse, the fable, to provide Florens with a means to combat racial oppression and sustain a more solid sense of herself.

Later on, Florens adds to the same idea by asserting her freedom in the novel, "I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. No ruth, my love. None. Hear me? Slave. Free. I last." (Morrison 2008, 161). This statement indicates that Florens defines her identity in terms of the natural world, "not the social conventions of the Early American society" as Maxine L. Montgomery suggests (2011, 634). In addition to this, Florens tries to achieve freedom by writing her story on the walls of Vaark's house and leaving no chance for anyone to read her "letters" clearly. This implies that she survives despite all; despite the addressee's inability to follow her story. She exists, and it no longer matters whether she is a slave or a free woman as the meanings of the two are different in her discourse.

M. Hansen reads Florens's final statements as her "coming into her own sovereignty," which she gains "in and with the writings on the walls" (2018, 223). She almost overcomes her traumatic incidents of the past and reconciles with her identity as a slave. Quan argues that "etched into the White colonialist's memorial, Florens's inscription functions as the culture memory for African American female slaves and as such undermines the completeness and validity of the White grand narrative that Jacob's mansion symbolizes" (2019, 456). Florens's story shakes the walls of Jacob's mansion that stand as a metaphor for institutions of racism. Florens feels self-fulfilled but still bears the marks of her traumatic past. "I last" is her last attempt to run for her life and survive. It is her last chance to make herself heard and prove her resilience (at least at the moment of uttering the words). Despite providing her with a means of survival, the power of her language does not salvage the wreckages of her past: her separation from her mother and her rejection by the blacksmith continue to puzzle her.

3. Race and gender intersecting freedom: A Free White Man, a Free Black Man, and Indentured White Men in *A Mercy*

The male characters of the novel perform their freedoms in various forms and to varying degrees. It turns out that the legally free white men may turn out to be victims of material thinking, while an (imagined) free black man can perform his freedom, and, at the same time, indentured white men can only dream about it.

The white Protestant trader, Jacob represents the ass in the skin of the lion. He is the owner of Florens and Sorrow, but is "enslaved" in ways similar to his wife: he blindly believes in his capacity of leading a life entirely on his own. Jacob represents early slaveowners in antebellum America. He builds a mansion based on his firm belief that it will stand as a marker of his name and status as a White member of the emerging American gentry. "What a man leaves behind is what a man is," he tells his wife (Morrison 2008, 89).

According to Laurie, "Jacob's embrace of the European ideology of manhood to enhance his life and the need for recognition (represented, as in *Absalom, Absalom!*, as a huge house he builds on money earned from slavery) allows him to deny and distance himself from collusion with slavery" (Laurie 2019, 97). However, this mansion witnesses his fall and death and becomes a place of slavery. Jacob does not approve of slavery and detests the ways the salves are maltreated by slave owners such as D'Ortega. However, when he sees the disparity between what such enslavers own and what he owns, he starts to take part in the institution of slavery, too. Valerie Babb argues that he "represents the possibility of an alternative white maleness that does not take advantage of arbitrarily constructed race and gender privilege," but "his coveting of material prestige is further conveyed through his desire for a house". That is to say, his "potential" is subverted as he cannot resist the "seduction of material wealth" (Babb 2011, 154). He starts

trading rum, which is a part of slavery economy, and build his mansion from this newly gained wealth. A house that does not represent a safe refuge for him and his family as it fails to balance neither his children's death at a young age, nor by his own. Rather, the house stands as a symbol of Vaark's rank and legacy, built up on what he gains from his contaminated trade.

The two indentured white servants, Willard and Skully, further scorn their status while encountering the free blacksmith. They cannot accept the idea of a black man being free and paid for his services. The blacksmith is well-accustomed to the mindset of people from different races and social status. To avoid any clashes with the two servants, he mocks them by calling them "Mr." "Willard never knew whether he was being made fun of or complimented. But when the smith said, "Mr. Bond. Good morning," it tickled him." (Morrison 2008, 150) This illustrates that the blacksmith knows precisely how to deal with the discriminating mentality of Whites and feed their ego in a sarcastic way. This is a point related both to Gates's depiction of the "monkey's" wise and scornful use of language against the lion, and to Morrison's reversal roles of free persons and slaves in her stimulating chiasmus.

The blacksmith is a freeman who manipulates Florens sexually, and later rejects her based on her having a slave mentality. Raised and appreciated as a free worker, he is unable to see the pains of being born and raised as a slave. He sees himself having the upper hand in his relationship with Florens. This superiority comes from both his free status and his gender. However, he feels less self-assured when the other two white servants are around. For instance, the blacksmith's masculinity is subject to violation or oppression as it is an intersection of gender and race. By this token, the blacksmith's masculinity is not entirely secured despite his free status compared to Willard and Skully, as his identity is an intersection of his race and gender. The two white workers are indentured by a seven-year contract and are even referred to as homosexuals, but their Whiteness places them above the free blacksmith. The blacksmith, thus, needs to avoid displaying his privilege of freedom, at least in the way he addresses the two men.

4. Conclusion

The position of freedom and enslavement are reversed in Morrison's *A Mercy* for the characters by the powerful language of the text. The brief story of "The Ass in the Lion's Skin" in the novel requires elaboration in order to explicate the potential language has in creating a sense of internal freedom. The allusion to the tale serves as an efficient tool that supports the enslaved characters to feel free from within and have a more accepting attitude towards themselves. The transforming potential of the tale works for several of characters. Florens, for instance, is transformed throughout the novel from a traumatized teenage slave to a survivor who seems to reach pertinent freedom by reconciling with her true self and understanding her position.

The inscription of Florens's story on the walls of Vaark's house suggests a healing potential in that it provides an alternative reading of history of race in America. The shiny and concrete colonial mansion is inscribed by the unheard stories of Florens's. In this respect, Morrison invites the reader to look behind the salient landmarks of colonial history and pay a closer attention to the histories of those who were marginalized and even left out in the process at the time the institution of slavery emerged in North America. The power of Morrison's language and tropes exceeds the mere reversal of roles between slavery and freedom in *A Mercy*, as it opens up a reflective view of race relations, slavery, and eventually of available acts of freedom, in colonial North America.

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