

INTERPRETATION OF TEXT, CONTEXT AND INTERTEXTUALITY IN GYNOTEXT: A STUDY OF TONI MORRISON'S *A MERCY*

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ABSTRACT

A close reading of Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* in this paper focuses on both the stylistic and thematic features through the interpretation of the distinct textual, contextual and intertextual elements. Firstly, as opposed to other researches done so far, it establishes the fact that the text drags readerly attention for two reasons like it is in medias res and the speech acts with heteroglossia ranging from daily life conversations to rhetorical expressions bear more importance than the prose narratives in shaping the configuration of it impressively. Secondly, with the traditional form of analysis, it attempts at focusing on the major contexts in it like traumatic memory; female subjugation; Afrocentric values; eco-feminism, Diaspora, marginality, literary historiography and canonization and discusses the novel as a demonic parody too. Thirdly, in the intertextual analysis, however, it deviates by arguing that although the novel is well-wrought with different themes as discussed earlier, it loses the gravity of gynotext with feminist force in comparison to the other contemporary feminist narratives ranging from African-American writings to Indian writings and Dalit writings and therefore hardly bears current social relevance except it is proved to be an autoethnographic narrative of 'repetition with difference'.

Keywords: in medias res, speech acts, heteroglossia, Afrocentric, subjugation, eco-feminism, gynotext, autoethnographic

1. Introduction

1.1 Interpretation of Text, Context and Intertextuality

Interpretation of text, context and intertextuality is a careful and circumspect work of entering into each textual labyrinth. It is the trend of the modern textual analysis of works of art inheriting and refining the patterns of *close reading* outlined by the New Critics. Richards and Schimidt (2002) define that a text is a segment of spoken or written language that bears distinctive structural and discourse characteristics; a particular communicative function or purpose; and can often only be fully understood in relation to the context in which it occurs. Texts are thought of as a more appropriate unit of analysis for many purposes. Context often helps in understanding the particular meaning of the word, phrase, etc. The context may also include the broader social situation in which a linguistic item is used. Intertextuality is the factors that make the use of one text depend on knowledge of other texts. In interpreting a text, a reader is said to make connections between the text and other texts s/he has encountered. The meaning a person derives from a text is thus said to result from the interaction between the readers' knowledge of the social and literary conventions associated with the text and the genre to which it belongs; the content of the text itself; and its relationship with other texts.

Thus, it is so to say an exploration of the synthesis of the web of distinct linguistic, literary and other epistemological phenomena vested in a text. This sort of interpretation has the potential to determine all the possible points of departure and destination of the text in terms of verbal journey coinciding the frames of both the structuralist and poststructuralist analysis.

1.2. African- American Gynotext: An Introduction

Although these days there are myriad of African-American women writings, the fictions of Alice Walker, Angela Davis and Toni Morrison and a few others are of wider readership related to Black feminism. Such African-American woman writers have been able to drag attention to the effect of historical facts of sexism, class oppression and racism. Their writings testify to ontological and political realities of African- American women.

In case of *A Mercy* as a gynotext, particularly the interpretation in the above light not only leads to thematic, psychoanalytic and socio-cultural critique but also seeks to explore relationships between language, sociology, subjectivity and power-relations as they impact upon gender in particular. In the words of Kriesteva (1986), the study aims to analyze how '... women seek to give a language to the intrasubjective and corporeal experiences left mute by culture in the past' (194). Thus, *A Mercy* gives voice to enough of ingredients conglomerating through uniqueness of narrative technique with emphasis on speech acts embroidered with *in medias res* by reflecting the reminiscences of feminine perspective of psychological, sociocultural, historical and environmental realities of a group of so called representative African-American women of the seventeenth century. But, it is worthwhile to examine how far the text, context and intertext of the narrative hold value for the readership of our time.

2. Analysis of the text of *A Mercy* (AM)

A Mercy (2008) by the Nobel Prize winning author Toni Morrison (1931-) is set in America in the mid to late 1600s in the early days of slavery. It gives voice to a remarkable group of characters: Jacob, an Anglo-Dutch farmer, trader and money lender; his wife Rebekka, newly arrived from England; their servant woman, the Native American Lina whose tribe has been wiped out by small pox; Florens, the slave girl who accepts as a payment of bad loan; and the

permanently shipwrecked Sorrow, the daughter of a sea captain killed in a storm off the coast of the Carolinas. These characters are taken by Sir as act of kindness to help his wife take care of the farm in his absence as he travels. When Sir dies, these women are left unprotected with an unpredictable future ahead of them. These ethnically and socially diverse characters suffer from alienation as Jacob's farm dissolves tragically. All these characters take turns narrating the story of the narrative and their voices carry the physical and emotional scars of the struggle of their lives. Florens in fact falls in love with the blacksmith and believes that he would protect her. She willingly travels to find him and bring him to save Sir from death. But, the blacksmith precedes her as a coincidence and arrives at the farm more quickly. After the death of Sir, Mistress, his wife drastically changes her treatment to all of them. She, previously kind has turned to religion and has become quite harsh in her treatment of the servants, who before were treated not as servants but as equals and friends.

2.1 *A Mercy* as a narrative

The narrative structure of the novel continues with multiple narrators. The twelve chapters alternate between the first-person narratives of Florens. Six chapters are narrated in the first person by Florens and the other six presented in third person by the other characters with the final word going to Florens' mother, the enslaved African. The story is revealed through non-linear narrative with constant flashbacks. The narrative is exclusively designed with the author's social vision, re-imagined relationships and redirected gaze they are designed to support. The narrative is a kind of 're-memory' by which 'individual experiences of suffering continue to exist at the site where the suffering happened. Thus, re-memory then becomes a mental spatial structure where what happened in a place at a time to one person experientially available to another time for another person. (Rushdy 2001, 6). In this way, *A Mercy* reflects the 'traumatic memory' transformed into narrative memory (Whitehead 2004, 140-41) on the assumption that constant shift from present to past in the narrative and characters' psyche through memories and telling of their life stories. The primal scene, which enacts a literal instance of mother-loss, therefore establishes a locus for the trope of motherlessness, which is repeated throughout the novel in each of the main characters.

2.2 *In medias res* in *A Mercy*

The beginning of *A Mercy* with *in medias res* when Florens' mother offers her daughter as a proxy for herself in a transaction which occurs between Jacob and one of his debtors. This eerie scene is retold throughout the novel from multiple perspectives (Florens, Jacob, Florens' mother), each time illuminating more about the actual event, as well as how each of the characters involved interprets it. In its retelling, this scene reverberates like an echo, emphasizing the way in which this bygone moment continues to exist in the evolving present of the novel, shaping not just factual circumstance (like Florens' presence in Jacob's farm), but also the thoughts and behaviors of Florens and other characters. The novel thus turns to be a counter narrative of heteroglossia.

It is noticed that in this narrative, the fundamental characteristics lies in the term that describes the tools of the story teller such as ordering events so that they build to a moment of climax or withholding information until a crucial or appropriate moment when revealing it creates a desired effect. It also constitutes a plot twist in the sequence of events set in the narrative; and the feeling of uncertainty and interest about the outcome of certain actions.

2.3 Importance of speech acts in *A Mercy*

It is noticed that the speech acts in the narrative contribute the coherence of the episodes. They reflect various varieties and modes of expressions. Thus, the narrative begins with a dramatic approach and a mark of fictional mode to the reader as Florens in the first person point of view says:

[1] Don't be afraid. My telling can't hurt you in spite of what.... You can think what I tell you a confession, if you like, but one full of curiosities familiar in dreams. (AM 10).

The narrative proceeds through the process of Florens introduces characters one by one and allows them to perform their parts respectively and carries further the link of the context ahead. She thus introduces Jacob on his way to meet D'Ortega to collect his money. When he meets D'Ortega, he uses different speech acts as he thinks:

[2] Does he cut losses and let his ship sail on to Barbados? No, thought Jacob. A sloven man, stubborn in his wrongheadedness like all of the Roman faith.... (AM 20).

This helps to sketch the characters in the novel. This is in the direct speech (DS) followed by a positive question and indirect speech (IS). The narrator often quotes the dialogues in the form of question and answer as Jacob asks:

[3] "Are they often ill, Madam?" asked Jacob. "As they pretend, no," said his hostess.

"Scoundrels they are. In Portugal they never get away with the trickery."

"They come from Portugal?" Jacob wondered if the serving woman understood English or if they cursed her only in Portuguese. (AM 22).

A similar context can be quoted from the conversation related to slave trading which is the context now. The narrator presents their casual and persuasive conversation:

[4] "You don't seem to comprehend my offer. I not forfeiting my debt. I honoring it. The value of a seasoned slave is beyond adequate."

"Not if I can't use her."

"Use her? Sell her!"

"My trade is good and gold, sir," said Jacob Vaark, landowner. And he could not resist adding,

"But I understand how hard it is for a Papist to accommodate certain kinds of restraint." (AM 27).

So now it is clear that in addition to farming, they make profit from slave trading. But, this is not liked by his wife Rebecca and she cannot express her dissatisfaction. She just thinks herself and feels nostalgic. The authorial voice is prevalent here with narrative report:

[5] "Trading and travelling fill his pockets," she'd said, "but he had been content to be a farmer when we married. Now...." Her voice trailed off as she yanked out the swan's feathers. (AM42).

Her emotional thoughts are expressed through a befitting expression as she says in free direct speech (FDS):

[6] "Need is not the reason..."

"What is, pray?" Rebecca cleared off the last drop of lather from the blade.

"What a man leaves behind is what a man is." (AM 81).

Through the narration of the plight of the focused characters, the novel continues the plot which reflects sort of resultant philosophy of it. Also these speeches reflect their identity as Lina says:

[7] “You and I, this land is our home,” she whispered, “but unlike you I am exile here.” (AM55).

The narrative technique of the novel gets momentum with dialogic expressions of different styles such as rhetorical questions as mentioned below:

[8] He grunted and entered Mistress’ bedroom. Lina and Sorrow watched him from the door as he sat on his haunches beside the sickbed.

“Thank you for coming,” whispered Mistress. “Will you make me drink my own blood? I’m afraid there is none left. None that isn’t polluted.”

He smiled and stroked her face.

“Am I dying?” she asked. (AM116).

The theme of the narrative in the dimension of the slave identity of the characters continues to be the dominant in the speeches maintaining textual coherence either in tragic or in mocking remarks as the following dialogic presentation:

[9] Your Mistress recovers you say. You say you will hire someone to take me to her. Away from you. Each word that follows cuts.

Why are you killing me I ask you.

I want you to go.

Let me explain.

No. Now.

Why? Why?

Because you are a slave.

.....I don’t mean him.

Then who?

You.

What is your meaning? I am a slave because Sir trades for me.(AM 126).

Florens alternately links the plot in her speeches till the last but one chapter where she ironically and with highly dramatic tone declares her reality as a slave:

[10] See? You are correct. A minha mãe too. I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full.

Unforgiven. Unforgiving. No ruth, my love. None. Hear me? Slave. Free. I last. (AM 141).

In the last chapter, her mother comes as the narrator in order to confirm the narrative and autobiographical accounts in a dramatic set up as she says in the form of implied narrator in free indirect speech (FIS):

[11] It was not a miracle. Bestowed by God. It was a mercy. Offered by a human. I stayed on my knees. In the dust where my heart will remain each night and every day until you understand what I know and long to tell you: to be given dominion over another is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing. Oh Florens. My love. Hear a tua mãe. (AM 144).

The speeches altogether range from daily life conversations to rhetorical expressions. The thoughts and actions of the characters are judged from the speeches set with the prose narrative

in the form of soliloquy, interior monologue with stream of consciousness. The levels of presentation of speeches are:

- i. Florens to audience with *in medias res*, personal experiences and introduction of other characters in the present time
- ii. Florens to audience in flashback in the past narrative in the present regarding quoting the speeches of other characters
- iii. Author presenting the speeches of the characters like Lina, Florens, Sir, Mistress, Sorrow and Rebecca with monitored speech in the past
- iv. Florens and author alternately presenting the speeches relating to the past.
- v. Florens' mother speaks to audience reflecting Florens and other characters in the present.

In *A Mercy*, [1] is vocative; [2] and [5] are referential; [3], [6], and [7] are expressive; [4] is representative and phatic; [8] is expressive with a rhetorical question; [9] is conversation having expressive, representative and declarative; [10] is representative; and [11] is declarative. The sequence of speeches is maintained by both in the form of question-answer and statements and responses giving the idea of informality and more open-ended social realities. The similarities in the speech acts are:

- i. The free speeches coordinate the prose narratives and happen to be the thematic voice of the narratives
- ii. The monitored speeches create complex semantic relations between various instances of the characters

A Mercy presents the voice of plight of slave women although they fulfill all the criteria of being sensible and conscious human beings like any other human beings and unrewarded in spite of performing their assigned duties. The speech acts give us the evidence that the female characters typically express themselves through their languages of deep feelings of love, culture, innocence, passive and sensitive ironically. The speech acts are neatly connected to each other through the textual prose narratives and fulfill the basic functions like establishing relationships between propositional structures of the text and help making out the intended and perceived meaning. The force of the speech acts in *A Mercy*, are pragmatically meaningful. The use of *in medias res* in the novel has made the speeches more dramatic and indirect leading to curiosity in comparison to the usual narratives. The forces of the plots are expedited by the speeches grown out of this technique of beginning in the middle of the story.

3. Analysis of the context of *A Mercy*

3.1 Female subjugation as a context

In *A Mercy*, Morrison demonstrates how women are conformed to the stereotypes that were cast upon them, such as their dependence of a male figure. The novel may be interpreted as a narrative of the emancipation of women by weaning themselves off from male dependence and strengthen them. But, the analysis shows that a lack of a male figure in the lives of both Rebecca and Florens leads them to internal destruction.

The burning example is Florens who shows how the patriarchal views are correlated with the dependence of a male in their lives after the blacksmith remains away from her. Florens is too viewed as an animal because of her compulsive actions. The blacksmith feels that Florens is not as intellectual as him. Florens gets raged by the power of hammer.

In the analysis of the context, it is noticed that women grow stronger by not relying on male but the female perception remains ironical. This can be marked from the expressions of Scully who finds the difference in Florens after her fight with the blacksmith. She says:

It was easy to spot that combination of defenselessness, eagerness to please and, most of all, a willingness to blame herself for the meanness of others. Clearly, from the look of her now, that was no longer true. The instant he saw her marching down the road—whether a ghost or a soldier—he knew she had become untouchable.’ (AM 152).

Before her incident with the blacksmith, she was perceived as vulnerable, and defenseless to the authority and a presence of male figure. After the incident, she was however perceived to be stronger but she was ‘untouchable’ because she was depressed with the outcome of her relationship with the blacksmith. The same thing happens to Rebecca too. Her entire life was centered on Jacob’s authority but afterwards, she gets psychologically affected when she writes, ‘And a few, like herself, after a mutually loving relationship, became like children when the man was gone’ (AM 98). She was not in fact a child but because of her dependence of a superior figure, she is treated so. Instead of using Jacob’s death to emancipate herself, she is floundering with emotions and subsequently faces internal destruction too. Thus, it is evident that these feminine characters fail to compromise between their true self, their emotions and the patriarchal views. In the novel, it becomes clear that women have active role in society which often leads to the undermining of their social rank and self-subjugation. The novelist reflects how women are not only the victims of a patriarchal and male dominated society but also as participants of their own oppression.

3.2 The authorial context of Afrocentric values

Toni Morrison has profound artistic and philosophical purposes in composing such narratives. *A Mercy* like Morrison’s other novels is not an art for art’s sake, as she claims, but they are tightly linked to the culture and history of her community. He quotes Morrison as she says, ‘I write [...] village literature, fiction that is really for the village, for the tribe’, she asserts, adding that her novels ‘should clarify the roles that have become obscured; they ought to identify those things in the past that are useful and those things that are not; and they ought to give nourishment’ (Morrison, 2008). In fact, in order to write literature deeply rooted in the African- American culture of her community, she incorporates implicitly the trope of the ancestor and memory. Morrison’s assertion implies that for an African-American woman writer, it is more important to create for the nourishment of the African-American community including both men and women than separate herself from it by assuming a Black feminist stance. Moreover, she is able to inculcate Afrocentric values in the narrative which differentiates the African-American community from other communities and this seems to be particularly empowering for Morrison, as it is for her characters.

4. Intertextuality in *A Mercy*

4.1 Eco-feminism as an intertextual phenomenon

A Mercy is replete with eco-feminist ambience in terms of a postmodern interpretation since it analyses the relationship between the patriarchal oppression of women and the human domination of non-human nature and reflects on how patriarchy and male domination is harmful to women as well as the environment. Also, it shows how the relation of women and nature on the one hand contesting the identification make women as passive and powerless whereas on the

other hand, it promotes positive identifications of nature with the reproductive capacity of women. In this context, the critical views of Peterson (2011) can be summarized as he says *A Mercy* is a narratological study of early American landscapes positioned as brilliant backdrops to a womanist liberation narrative. Firstly, the text maps the relationship between characters and the environment on land and sea, paying particular attention to the tensions inherent in certain characters' perceptions of the environment and humanity's relationship to it in a colonial environment. Secondly, excavation of the maps of specific scenes/allusions in order to engage in a literary cartography, at least to the extent that it yields new understandings of old America specifically relevant to the readers' full comprehension of the novel. He emphatically says that eco-critical focal points function as tethers that bind the characters to the wilderness, to an environmental history that features lost Indian communities, and to the historical loss of eco-critical ideologies.

4.2 The postcolonial concepts

There are traces of some post colonial concepts in the novel. It is marked from the discussion of critics like Wardi (2011) who focuses on *A Mercy* links nation building that is 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.

She draws the attention of readership into the European settlement of the American continent to situate the slave experience within the context of Empire and colonialism. It revisits these themes but combines them with an exploration of the colonialism and imperialism that fuelled the establishment of race-based slavery in the New World. In addition, the novel also raises conceptual questions fundamental to a survey by foregrounding the processes of literary historiography and canonization. The feminine characters in reflecting their plights and while searching for identity also go beyond the sphere of their position with marginality. They can be given subaltern status and discussed under transnationalism.

4.3 The novel as a demonic parody

The novel is classified as a demonic parody as it offers an apocalyptic representation of an unbearable world of evil to emphasize the hell on the earth that the Native Americans, African-Americans suffered shortly after the arrival and settlement of the Europeans. Along with servitude, Morrison disrupts the classificatory nature of early American slave codes by emphasizing in her descriptions of the major female characters hybrid identities of various sorts. Lina, for example, is taken from a Native American community to a Presbyterian one, where she constructs an individual syncretic religious practice: "Relying on memory and her own resources, she cobbled together neglected rites, merged Europe medicine with native, scripture with lore, and recalled or invented the hidden meaning of things" (*AM* 56). Sorrow, whose racial background is deliberately blurred, grows up on the nebulous space of the sea, and when she is found, is thought by her rescuers to "be a boy." Florens is described as having the "hands of a slave and the feet of a Portuguese lady" (*AM* 4). The women embody in their persons and practice the crossing of racial, gendered, religious and class borders.

5. Conclusion: Synthesizing the text, context and intertextuality in *A Mercy*

A Mercy as a gynotext can be compared with other similar writings. Firstly, we have the most popular British, American and Indian male fiction writers those who position their women

protagonists in many active, heroic and decisive roles for which they stand as metaphors of dynamic feminism. The characters ranging from Pamela (Richardson's *Pamela*), Ms. Abbot (Foster's *Where Angels Fear to Tread*) to Dhania (Premchand's *Godan*) are some of the burning examples with which Florens is no match. Secondly, in a comparative as well as chronological study of Morrison's novels, it is noticed that *The Bluest Eye* shows Pecola's sufferings and psychological disintegration. There is guilt, a sense of hopelessness and an image of the wasteland all around. Violence in *Sula* is more destructive than the earlier as it reflects a chronicle of the slow destruction over time of the entire community of the bottom. In *Song of Solomon*, violence is less pervasive than it is in her two previous novels. Here violence stems from the pressure that the white society places on the black community to abandon their traditional values and to adopt white values of materialism. *Tar Baby* marks a subtle departure from the more physical violence of Morrison's earlier novels to the psychological torment, child abuse, abandonment and discrimination. In *Beloved* violence emerges from slavery and oppression. It departs from Morrison's earlier works in its willingness to identify violence among blacks as a direct response to oppression by the dominant white culture. As an extension of the similar trend, *A Mercy* is more associated with alienation; sense of insecurity and traumatic memories; search for identity; impact of slavery; and trope of motherlessness. So, finally it is to be asserted that this novel like her other novels can be called 'repetition with difference' (Gates, 1988). It follows an intertextual technique revising rhetorical tropes used by earlier writers within this tradition to point to the theme of settler colonialism. However, the narrative is of creative and implicit value to the tenets of the Black Arts Movement of the 60's at least by purging the socio-cultural and artistic consciousness.

A Mercy comes in terms with the second wave feminist criticism consisting of five main focuses like biology; experience; discourse; the unconscious; and social and economic conditions. The discourse pattern is designed according to the radical and psychoanalytical feminism as opposed to the current trends of existentialist, postmodern or rational feminism. What undermines the fiction thematically is that the narrative cycle of counting on the mimetic historical reality of the reminiscences of the plight of life of the group of subjugated female characters shows a form of struggle without existentialist mode and therefore it is a story of the past; a narrative with a more personal- conversational tone and it fails to display the brevity and feminine attributes among its female characters as is recurrently found in the domain of gynotexts for example in Indian women writings like Ashapura's female protagonists or in Dalit feminist writings. Even a comparison can be made with the female characters like Celie in an equally potential contemporary fiction *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker (1944-) wherein the women characters hopefully get used to the reforming their thoughts and actions to form their distinct identity finally. *A Mercy* like a host of other African-American narratives bears the testimony of autoethnography. It does not have perspectives to outsider readers who have been ignorant of the historical or canonical lacunae too. But after all, it is a brilliant and realistic narrative revealing the lives of a group of African-American women which since the remote past did not have its way to be ventilated to the world until it happens to be Morrison's turn.

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