ENSLAVED BY MOTHER AND LOVER: FLORENS' IMPOSSIBLE SEARCH FOR SELF-LOVE IN TONI MORRISON'S *A MERCY*

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Abstract

Toni Morrison's A Mercy, set in America in the seventeenth century, the country's formative years, focuses on the lives of a small group of women in a de facto community with a largely absent trader patriarch. Florens, a black slave girl expelled from her mother's home, is the novel's primary narrator, one who, unlike the other women in her community, seeks fulfillment outside that deceptively self-sufficient group. Throughout the novel, Florens seeks fulfillment, a sense of self, and consequently self-love through a romantic relationship with a free black man, a blacksmith who works at the Vaark farm.Analyzing Florens' unsatisfying journey towards selfhood in a primarily Freudian psychoanalytic framework shows that her search for wholeness as a black woman in seventeenth century America is impossible.Florens' futile search for recognition is perverted by her mother's and her lover's perceptions of her body as dangerously sexual and potentially castrating, which are reflective of larger cultural perceptions of the black female body. Florens' need for affectionate attention is consistently halted by the blame her body garners.

Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*, set in America in the seventeenth century, the country's formative years, focuses on the lives of a small group of women, one white, one Native American, and two black, who comprise their own de facto community with a largely absent trader patriarch, Jacob Vaark.The women are bound by similarities in their histories: they have been subject to or have witnessed the violence of white men; they have been treated as commodities; and they are all orphans, sold or abandoned by their families. Florens, a black slave girl expelled from her mother's home and acquired by Vaark to settle a debt, is the novel's primary narrator, one who, unlike the other women in her community, seeks fulfillment outside that deceptively self-sufficient group whose inevitable dependence on the outside world and its institutions – family, the church, heterosexual relationships -- is painfully revealed upon Vaark's death.

Throughout the novel, Florens seeks fulfillment, a sense of self, and consequently self-love through a romantic relationship with a free black man, a blacksmith who works at the Vaark farm. This desire for recognition by another is a desire to fill the void left by her mother, who expelled her from her family, believing Florens' body and presence to be dangerous, but kept Florens' brother. Consistent with Andrea O'Reilly's argument that "[c]hildren who are orphaned, abandoned, or denied nurturant mothering are psychologically wounded as adults" (367), Florens desperately wants someone to replace the absent first love-object, the person who was supposed to confer recognition on her. Though Florens' relationship with the blacksmith seems to offer the hope of making her feel whole, it cannot possibly lend subjectivity to an enslaved woman whose race and gender make her the invisible other at this time in America. Ultimately, the blacksmith rejects Florens as her mother does, deeming her an animal and choosing his foundling male child over her. Though "Morrison argues that

self-love depends first on the self's being loved by another self" (O'Reilly 367), this novel shows that the first step to self-love is fleeting at best.

Analyzing Florens' two formative expulsions and her unsatisfying journey towards selfhood in a primarily Freudian psychoanalytic framework showsthather search for wholeness as a black woman in seventeenth century America is impossible. As Juliet Mitchell notes, "[p]sychoanalysis is not a recommendation for a patriarchal society, but an analysis of one" (xiii). Florens' futile search for recognition is perverted by her mother's and her lover's perceptions of her body as dangerously sexual and potentially castrating, which are reflective of larger cultural perceptions of the black female body that Deborah McDowell discusses in "Recovery Missions" as"simultaneously all bodies and nobodies" (298).McDowell addresses the formidable burdens bodies like Florens' bear as the site of identity:"Our 'bodies' come into being and consciousness often at those privileged, sometimes pleasurable, but often painful moments when our primordial desire to be desired is frustrated (or gratified) and our bodies take the credit or the blame" (298). Florens' need for affectionate attention is consistently halted by the blame her body garners.

Florens' search for subjectivity is prompted by the first rejection she endures because of her body, rejection by her mother. Though Florens' mother, her minha mae, offers her to Jacob Vaark, a man whose morality she intuits, so that Florens is not subject to the rape she endured, the true reason for the mother's abandonment is only revealed to the reader at the novel's end.Since Florens remains unaware of her mother's reason for giving her up, she feels she was rejected because her body marks her as "bad" and because her mother prefers the son to the daughter, which places mother, son, and daughter in a Freudian triad where Florens is an outcast.That the mother "is made unreliable or unavailable by a slave system which either separates her from her child or so enervates and depletes her that she has no self with which to confer recognition" (Schapiro 194)further complicates the entanglements of the Freudian family bonds.

Florens' frivolity, her desire to wear the fancy shoes discarded by the plantation's mistress, elicits her mother's scornful statement that "Only bad women wear high heels" (4). This exhibition of sexuality in opposition to her mother's hopes for her indicates that Florens is in a transitional state in Freudian development, going from "lov[ing] her mother actively" (Benjamin 87) to separating from the mother in an attempt to appeal to the father by portraying herself as the passive recipient of his desire. Florens' choice of heels is telling, since they inhibit free movement, making her physically passive and helpless to the active power of the father; the heels she wears, furthermore, are too big for her, indicating her desire to "fill the shoes" of an adult, sexual woman.Her delicate, pretty feet, like those "of a Portuguese lady" (4) clad in the ornamentation of the oppressor,result from the narcissistic preening Freud argues that girls may undertake to "phalliciz[e] [their] whole bod[ies]" and compensate for their deficiencies (Grosz 150). Florens' narcissism, though a response to her status as other in society, looks to her mother like naïve vanity and the precursor to immorality, creating a gulf between the two.

Freud theorizes that, during childhood development,a little girl loves her mother until discovering that both she and the mother lack a phallus; ultimately, the girl must reject the mother and the lack she represents in favor of the father and his phallic possession in order to become feminine (Benjamin 87). In a Lacanian sense, "[t]he phallus…represents an illusion of wholeness and self-sufficiency" (Sprengnether 197), which the girl is drawn to in order to make up for her newly realized lack. This alliance with the father, the plantation owner who raped Florens' mother, is what the mother fears, since she does not want her daughter enslaved by the whims of male desire, placed in "the position of being the father's object" (Benjamin 87).

The phallus of this father can offer no wholeness or independence for a slave girl whose body is a source of alienation because its femaleness andits race make it a site of production, or, as McDowell argues,"black women's *corporeal* bodies remain subject to subjection, subject to others' control"

(302). Sex with the father or with white men possessing patriarchal power is a literal possibility, since Florens' beauty, even at a young age, elicits admiring glances from the men she encounters. In Freudian terms, "[F]or the girl acceptance of 'castration' indicates that she should become *like* her mother" (Mitchell 111), so Florens' development could mean years of sexual subjugation.The mother's feelings toward Florens are thus less envy, as was implied by her response to Florens' soft feet, than fear that her daughter will be as trapped as she is, for "to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing" (196).Envy of her daughter would be useless, since, "how much point is there in competing with another one of the same 'castrated' sex?" (Mitchell 111).

In a Freudian framework, however, the mother's motives are never entirely selfless. Florens' mother rejects her in favor of her male child, the possessor of the phallus who can make up for her lack. Mitchell notes that "for the woman the baby is a substitute for the missed penis" (7) and the male child, theoretically allied with the mother and against the father, poses no possible harm but promises a sense of fulfillment to the mother. Freud notes that "[a] mother…can transfer to her son the ambition which she has been obliged to suppress in herself, and she can expect from him the satisfaction of all that has been left over in her of her masculinity complex" (Sprengnether 84). Florens, on the other hand, "an open wound that cannot heal" (191) in her lack, can fill no void for her mother.

All Florens knows is that her mother makes a choice to keep one child, despite the mother's and daughter's apparent bond that renders them a community in and of themselves: "only the person we have not yet recognized as outside (mother and wife) can be trusted to provide us with care…the only safe dependence is on someone who is not part of the struggle of all against all, and indeed, who is herself not independent" (Benjamin 202).Though she is in a developmental stage where active love of the mother has passed, Florens still has a connection with her mother based on their mutual lack. The two even have a shared language that does not translate in a patriarchal world outside the home; when Florens hears people other than her mother speak, she notes,"All of what I hear is different from what words mean to a minha mae and me" (7).

Rejection by her mother renders Florens eager for affection in the Vaark home: "However slight, any kindness shown her she munched like a rabbit. Jacob said the mother had no use for her which…explained her need to please" (113).However, finding a mother substitute in Rebekka, Jacob Vaark's wife, or Lina, the Native American woman bought by Jacob, would only allow Florens to identify with another who is lacking, another woman who might reject her in favor of a man who possesses phallic power. Since Florens' development into "normal" womanhood requires her finding a father-figure, who "is always the way into the world" (Benjamin 103), as a love object, the blacksmith, a free man who"seem[s] complete, unaware of his effect" (147), is the most viable option to facilitate her entry into femininity. The completion Florens senses in this man is appealing because it makes her perceive her goal of feeling whole more within reach, consistent with Jessica Benjamin's contention that "many women enter into love relationships with men in order to acquire vicariously something they have not got within themselves" (89). That the blacksmith is a black man allows Florens a further opportunity for recognition: "You have the outside dark as well" (136). The blacksmith, who is never named, since he is known mainly by his ability to manipulate the most obstinate metal with his hands, promises the power to forge Florens as well into a renewed and whole human being.

At the outset, the relationship between Florens and her lover is deceptively ideal. To those who observe Florens' and the blacksmith's unselfconscious outdoor lovemaking, Florens appears an active participant, "not standing quietly under the weight and thrust of the male" (151), a possessor of desire instead of a passive recipient of it. Florens' perception of her body as dangerous, the reason for love to be withdrawn, begins to fade as she feels that the blacksmith accepts her body and therefore her: "With you my body is pleasure is safe is belonging" (161).

However, there are hints that this seemingly balanced and fulfilling relationshipis based upon an extreme imbalance of power that is consistent with any patriarchal institution in America's early years that women tried to navigate.Because of this disparity, Freud notes, "something in the nature of the sexual instinct…is unfavorable to the realization of complete satisfaction" (Sprengnether 84). Lina, who tries to take Florens under her wing, is wary of "the shattering a free black man would cause" (71), and is the one of the only people who foresees the disastrous possibilities of Florens' extreme devotion. Willard, a sometime occupant of the Vaark farm, an indentured servant who performs odd jobs, speaks of Florens' tendency to "hun[t][the blacksmith] like a she-wolf if he's not in her eye" (177), foreshadowing the lovers' later parting on the basis of Florens' animalistic nature.

Another hint of the relationship's ultimate dissolution comes from Florens herself, who, when telling her story in an apostrophic address to the blacksmith, says, "Before you know I am in the world I am already kill by you" (44). Positing the blacksmith's presence as lethal indicates the level of control he holds over her by simply being male and Florens lends him further power by acknowledging that her presence initially made no impression on him. Florens further sets the stage for rejection by positing herself not as one branch of her lover's tree, which could be broken off and must share space with other branches, but as his whole tree. A treeis firm and proud, seemingly symbolic of the phallus; Florens' proud association of herself with the phallic will inevitably doom a heterosexual relationship where only one, the man, can possess phallic power. According to Jessica Benjamin, though, a woman's impression that she has achieved agency through a romantic relationship is common when she feels, even erroneously, that her partner acknowledges her subjectivity: "A person comes to feel that 'I am the doer who does, I am the author of my acts,' by being with another person who recognizes her acts, her feelings, her intentions, her existence, her independence" (21).

Since the blacksmith's freedom permits movement from place to place and since he evidently sees no reason to make a lasting commitment to Florens, he leaves the Vaark farm when his labor is done, devastating Florens, who proclaims, "I don't want to be free of you because I am live only with you" (82). Subsequently, Jacob Vaark dies from smallpox and his wife, Rebekka, is also stricken, prompting Florens, "a love-broken girl on the loose" (68), to make a journey to summon the blacksmith, a man largely perceived by the women of the Vaark farm as a healer and stabilizing force.

Florens' tireless journey and the apostrophic monologue that accompanies it exhibits her continued surrender to the blacksmith as an object of desire and as the father figure who can make her complete: "No holy spirits are my need. No communion or prayer. You are my protection. Only you. You can be it because you say you are a free man" (81). According to Jessica Benjamin, "[t]he belief that a man will provide access to a world that is otherwise closed to her is one of the great motives of ideal love" (116). Florens feels not only that her lover can heal the pain of her mother's rejection but also that he, by virtue of being male and free, can help her break the constraints placed upon her because she is a woman and enslaved. Her kinship with the phallic tree reemerges during this arduous journey as she states, "[w]hat I know is that I wilt when you go and am straight when Mistress sends me to you" (124), showing Florens' erroneous perception of herself as signifier.

When Florens reaches the blacksmith's home, she finds that he has adopted a child, Malaik, whose father, his only relative, died in an accident. This discovery deflates Florens' confidence that reuniting with her lover will culminate in her completeness, since the blacksmith gazes lovingly at the child "[a]s if he is your future. Not me" (160). The blacksmith leaves Florens with Malaik while he travels to the Vaark farm to help Rebekka, and during this time, Florens has a telling dream which indicates the futility of seeking self-love via love of another. In the dream, Florens gazes into a pond in the manner of Narcissus. However, instead of seeing her reflection, her ideal self in the water, she sees nothing. In Lacanian theory, the mirror-image represents what the reflected can never be, a depressing prospect for someone trying to be the ideal image in a society intent on fragmenting the

self. Florens' prospects are all the more bleak, though, since the water, revealing her invisibility in society, offers no ideal to strive for. Any effort to achieve subjectivity is therefore futile.

In the dream, Florens turns from the water to see her mother standing with Malaik, indicating her fear that the blacksmith's adopted child, like Florens' brother, will be chosen over her: "I know how their eyes go when they choose" (9). The dream is realized when the blacksmith returns to see that Florens has broken Malaik's arm in a show of violence against a child who tormented her by stealing her most beloved possession, the shoes that kept her feet soft and facilitated her narcissistic attempt to phallicize and empower her body. Florens' anger, seemingly excessive in response to a child's prank, stems from a perversion of her desire for love, motivated by her disturbing dream: "[d]esire in woman thus appears as envy – perhaps only as envy" (Benjamin 89).

Florens' lover expels her from his home, choosing Malaik for the same reason that Jessica Benjamin notes all fathers choose their sons: "The father recognizes himself in his son, sees him as the ideal boy he would have been; so identificatory love plays its part on the parent's side from the beginning" (109). In a Freudian sense, the blacksmith sides with Malaik as he rejects Florens because the child, like the adopted father, possesses the phallus and the power it connotes. The father can see himself in the son but cannot see achieve recognition with a powerless, lacking woman. Eliminating Florens from the Freudian triad ensures that the Oedipal model cannot come to fruition, that the woman will not cause the son to turn against the father, that the two will not have their relationship violated over competition for a lacking being.

The blacksmith shuns Florens for having an animalistic nature, saying, "Your head is empty but your body is wild" (166).Echoing Florens' mother, the blacksmith attributes danger to her body, noting its potential to devour or castrate with its "inside dark…small, feathered, and toothy" (135), like a predatory bird waiting to emerge.Ultimately, Florens' lover has aligned himself with "the identification of female sexuality as voracious, insatiable, enigmatic, invisible, and unknowable, cold, calculating, instrumental, castrator/decapitator of the male, dissimulatress or fake, predatory, engulfing mother" (Grosz 203). Florens' attempt to phallicize herself, to make her body desirable, desired, and powerful, coupled with her voracious love for this man, has made her an object of fear and disgust instead of the fulfilled beloved.

By the novel's end, Florens is a speechless shell, weeping quietly in the dark and unable to muster her passionate drive for love and self-love. No longer preoccupied with being an object of desire, she lets her feet grow rough by walking barefoot through the wilderness, back to the Vaark home and to another possibility of expulsion.The culmination of her journey in failure does not offer an uplifting view of the extent of female strength, but her failure is a logical representation of the insurmountable barriers facing slave women during the early years of this institution's inception. Morrison's message, when analyzed in a psychoanalytic framework, realistically reflects the values of seventeenth century America: though a black woman in America's formative years may have, like any other human, sought means in which to love herself, this love cannot be possible, since both race and gender dictate that she will not fully be recognized, loved, or accepted by anyone else.

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