

A Black Woman's Standpoint in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* *

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Abstract: Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* unveils the history during the colonial period of the 17th century when slavery dawned and racial and sexual conflicts rose in the new world America. Mainly centering on Florens and her experience, this paper adopts black feminist standpoint theory to study the black girl's trip that transforms her from a timid and ignorant girl to a strong and independent woman. Daughter Jane and the black smith, who play the role of Outsiders Within, empower Florens by destroying her old understanding of the world and replacing it with a new perspective in viewing herself, other marginalized people, and slavery, which leads to the self-definition and the self-valuation of her identity as a black woman. Finally, through writing on the floors of Jacob's mansion, she adds an African female slave's perspective on slavery to the mainstream white patriarchal worldview. This new knowledge gives a voice to the marginalized colored women.

Keywords: *A Mercy*; Florens; Black feminist standpoint theory; Outsider Within; Identity

* Submission Date: April 13, 2023; Acceptance Date: May 9, 2024.

托尼·莫裏森小說《慈悲》中的黑人女性立場

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摘要：托尼·莫裏森的小說《慈悲》講述一個發生在十七世紀殖民時代美國的故事，此時蓄奴制處於萌芽階段，種族和性別衝突開始出現。本文運用黑人女性立場理論，主要分析故事主人公弗洛倫絲及其經歷，探討其如何從一個柔弱和無知的小女孩轉變為一個堅強和獨立女人。白人女孩簡和鐵匠在故事中扮演黑人女性立場理論中圈內局外人的角色，他們在弗洛倫絲的自我身份構建中起到舉足輕重的作用，幫助她拋棄了舊的、錯誤的立場，樹立起一個全新的看待自己、看待社會邊緣群體、看待蓄奴制的立場，最終重新定義和評價自己作為黑人女性的身份。最後，通過在奴隸主雅各的大房子裏寫下自己的經歷，弗洛倫絲將一個非籍女性奴隸的觀點，注入白人男性至上的社會主流意識中，而這新的知識使得社會邊緣女性的聲音不再被忽視。

關鍵字：《慈悲》、弗洛倫絲、黑人女性立場理論、圈內局外人、自我身份構建

1. Introduction

Toni Morrison's ninth novel, *A Mercy*, is an extension of her exploration of the topics that her earlier works such as *The Bluest Eye*, *Beloved*, *Paradise*, and *Song of Solomon* center on. The themes include traumatic memory, slavery, racism, sexism, mother and daughter relationship, distorted love, identity establishment, etc. which are what Morrison, as a female African-American writer, is deeply interested in and repeatedly discusses in the creation of the fascinating fictional worlds. *A Mercy* is not a mere replicate of the other masterpieces. As Morrison admits in an interview that *A Mercy* represents the height of her writing career in terms of thematic scope and writing experience.¹ What sets the book apart from her other writings is the author's ambitious attempt to uncover the veil of slavery by looking back at its origin in America, and provide different perspectives in understanding the sufferings of different groups of people at that time, including the white, the black, native Americans, men, women, mothers, and daughters. It sheds light on a historical period that is often overshadowed by the better-known era of slavery, through which the complexities of race and identity in the country are revealed. Although there are only 167 pages in the book, the story is complex and profound.

The story, mainly built around Florens' self-discovery journey, reveals the dawn of slavery and the rise of racial and sexual conflicts in the new continent during the 17th century. The protagonist is an enslaved black girl called Florens, who is brought back by a white trademan named Jacob Vaark to his farm as an act of mercy as both of them believe that the seven-year-old is abandoned by her mother. The experience traumatizes the girl and she is unable to recover in spite of the seemingly safe and peaceful life in the farm. Years later, the girl is sent to travel alone as a messenger to seek a healer— a blacksmith whom she is madly in love with—for her dying mistress. Terrible things happen during the trip, which completely transform Florens from a timid, ignorant, and love-disabled girl to a strong, independent, and untouchable woman, enabling her, as a slave, a black, and a

¹ It was an interview with Charlie Rose right after the publication of *A Mercy* in 2008. <https://charlierose.com/videos/12082>.

woman, to find her identity.

The story, especially Florens' traumatic experience, has been studied by many scholars from different perspectives, among which the ecological and the historical point of views are dominating. For example, Bowen studies the use of animal images in the story as symbols which leads to the conclusion that the animality reflects Florens' search for an ecological identity, and her new relation with the environment.² The animal and human relations are also discussed in Alexandre's study, in which she argues that for the author, animal characteristics in human nature break the boundaries of race, class and gender.³ Similarly, Terry proposes a new definition of "wilderness", especially from Floren's experience, which reveals the hierarchical geographical relations and finally leads to a better understanding of the natural world.⁴ On the other hand, from a historical point of view, Montgomery argues that Morrison advocates true equality not just between men and women, or black and white, but also among people from different races, classes and genders.⁵ These people's lives, which are mostly connected by Florens' experience, encourage an examination of America's history and a denial of racial categorization. By putting the story in a historical and spatial context, Hansen points out that *A Mercy* is about how space is conceived and the New World is created.⁶ Florens, as the first generation of African-American women, should be understood as a global subject, and the story reveals white supremacy and patriarchy during the globalization and the political world-making in that particular period of time in American history.

The researches mentioned above show the complexity of the novel. But in the previous

² Bowen, L. "Learning to Read Ecologically: Disability, Animality, and Metaphor in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*." *ELH*. 88 (2021): 525-550.

³ Alexandre, S. "Lovesick in the Time of Smallpox: Romancing the State of Nature in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*." *Criticism*. 59.2 (2017): 223-246.

⁴ Terry, J. "'Breathing the Air of a World So New': Rewriting in the Landscape of America in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*." *Journal of American Studies*. 48 (2014): 127-145.

⁵ Montgomery, M. L. "Got on My Traveling Shoes: Migration, Exile, and Home in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*." *Journal of Black Studies*. 42.4 (2011): 627-637.

⁶ Hansen, M. "I Am Becoming Wilderness: Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* and Global American Space," *Literature Interpretation Theory*. 29.3 (2018): 210-227.

studies some jigsaw pieces are missing in revealing the girl's psychic development. First, many studies focus on Florens' formative experience, such as her adventure into the wild, or the traumatic experience in mother-daughter separation.⁷ Few looks at the knowledge she gains that enables her transformation. Second, unlike many female characters in Morrison's other novels who also undergo self-finding journey in various ways, Florens does not have any support from communities. It seems that she accomplishes the transformation all by herself. But a careful reading of the story shows that she has allies – Daughter Jane and the blacksmith. However, the importance of these two characters has been undermined in the previous studies. Daughter Jane and her story of oppression is either neglected, or interpreted as an isolated case that is weakly related with Florens.⁸ The blacksmith, on the other hand, is usually considered as a catalyst for Florens' transformation, but as Carlacio suggests that he is “neither the cause nor the agent of it”.⁹ In fact, these two characters play crucial parts in helping Florens gain the knowledge of the world and herself. Therefore, in this study, the author tends to bridge the research gap and proposes to study the story from a new perspective – black feminist standpoint theory. The theory focuses on the experiences of black women, a group of people that have been marginalized and muted by society for a long time. Usually practiced within sociology, this theory is seldom used in literary criticism. However, because of its nature in indication of social reality and openness to alternative reading, literature is considered as “an ideal site for an examination of the processes and provocations of standpoint theory”.¹⁰ So with this new approach, this study aims to understand this girl's individual experience in the special period of time in human history with a focus on how her understanding of the world and herself is formed and how Daughter Jane and the blacksmith help in the process, so that

⁷ Hansen, M. “I Am Becoming Wilderness: Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* and Global American Space,” *Literature Interpretation Theory*. 29.3 (2018): 210-227.

⁸ Wyatt, J. “Failed Messages, Maternal Loss, and Narrative Form in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*,” *Modern Fiction Studies*. 58.1 (2012): 128-151..

⁹ Strehle, S. “‘I Am a Thing Apart’: Toni Morrison, *A Mercy*, and American Exceptionalism,” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*. 54.2 (2013): 109-123.

¹⁰ Lenz, B. “Postcolonial Fictional and the Outsider Within: Toward a Literary Practice of Feminist Standpoint Theory.” *NWSA Journal*. 16.2 (2004): 98-120.

more pieces of situated and discursive knowledge about black women might be revealed.

2. Black feminist standpoint theory

Firstly developed in the 1980s by Nancy Martsock and Sandra Harding, feminist standpoint theory is a branch of standpoint theory which focuses on the marginalized groups of people and their understanding of the cultures from which they are marginalized. It is believed that all knowledge is from some perspective.¹¹ “Standpoint refers not to perspective or experience but to an understanding of perspective and experience as part of a larger social setting—that is, a standpoint is an intellectual achievement that reflects political consciousness.”¹² A key claim in feminist standpoint theory is that women are not only physically but also socially and politically different from men which generates completely different knowledge. Thus there is a different standpoint, or a perspective on their lives. This knowledge challenges the dominating masculinist definition of truth and establishes “an alternative vision of truth”.¹³

Black feminist standpoint theory has further developed the feminist standpoint theory, with Patricia Hill Collins as the main contributor. Being an Afro-American woman means more challenges than a white woman as she has to face multiple forms of oppression in life including sexual, racial and hierarchical discrimination from white men, black men, and white women. The special social position enables Afro-American women to form unique standpoint, which is sociologically significant as it reveals particular truth of race, class, and gender. However, it does not mean that being a black woman will surely lead to a black feminist standpoint, because it is “achieved – earned through critical reflection on power

¹¹ Hundleby, C. “Feminist Standpoint Theory as A Form of Naturalist Epistemology.” PhD diss., The University of Western Ontario, 2001, https://must.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/853MUST_INST/4n97dq/cdi_proquest_journals_304771672; Foucault, M. *Power/Knowledge*. New York: Pantheon, 1980.

¹² Hundleby, C. “Feminist Standpoint Theory as A Form of Naturalist Epistemology.” PhD diss., The University of Western Ontario, 2001, https://must.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/853MUST_INST/4n97dq/cdi_proquest_journals_304771672.

¹³ Foucault, M. *Power/Knowledge*, New York: Pantheon, 1980.

relations and through engaging in the struggle required to construct an oppositional stance".¹⁴ Collins proposes three ways to form the standpoint of and for a black woman and one of them is self-definition and self-valuation. Black women are defined by the negative stereotypes (for example, white men's mules, Sapphires, matriarchs, being aggressive, etc.) in the dominant patriarchal and white society as a way to dehumanize them and exploit their labor. So in order to reject these controlling images and the internalized psychological oppression, or in other words to achieve a standpoint, they have to properly define and value themselves. "Self-definition involves challenging the political knowledge-validation process that has resulted in externally-defined, stereotypical images of Afro-American womanhood. In contrast, self-valuation stresses the content of Black women's self-definitions – namely, replacing externally-derived images with authentic Black female images."¹⁵ Black women have to create their own standards for black womanhood and value it as acts of resistance and empowerment before obtaining subjectivity in this hostile society. This is also the process of establishing a black woman's standpoint, which can reframe the dialogue between this group of people and the world.

3. Florens

At the beginning of the story, Florens is described as the Other who lacks the ability of defining her identity. She is a black slave, with a strong desire for "the feet of a Portuguese lady".¹⁶ It is even before the maternal loss she experiences which haunts her through the whole book. At that time when she is only a child in a Portuguese farm, she "always beg for shoes ... even on the hottest days" so her mother gives her the shoes thrown away by their white mistress with "pointy-toe, one raised heel broke, the other worn and a

¹⁴ Wood, J. T. "Feminist Standpoint Theory and Muted Group Theory: Commonalities and Divergences." *Women and Language*. 28.2 (2005): 61-72.

¹⁵ Collins, P. H. "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought." *Social Problems*. 33.6 (1986): 14-32.

¹⁶ Morrison, T. *A Mercy*. New York: Vintage, 2008.

buckle on top”.¹⁷ Then she is acquired by Jacob, a farmer in America as a slave in exchange for the bad debt of her former master, a Portuguese slaveholder. Years later, when she sets out for the important trip to save her mistress Rebekka, she wears “Sir’s boots that fit a man not a girl”.¹⁸ The boots are so big that “hay and oily corn husks” have to be stuffed inside.¹⁹ What Florens wants resembles Pecola’s desire for a pair of blue eyes in Morrison’s 1970 novel *The Bluest Eye*. Resembling Pecola’s experience with internalities and externalities of dominance and despair, Florens’ craving for shoes, especially the ones worn by the white, reveals the girl’s inability of constructing a standpoint on her racial identity by herself.²⁰ Instead, she subconsciously internalizes the white’s social norms, based on which she defines the world and herself so that she is able to walk and feel protected in this dangerous world. In other words, these shoes symbolize the adoption of the dominators’ standpoint. However, it is problematic for the reason that it is unfitted to the dominated, just like the shoes which are either worn-out or too big. It partly explains why Florens constantly feels insecure and tries hard to please everyone around her: “she was deeply grateful for every shred of affection, any pat on the head, any smile of approval”, because she sees her life and the world from a wrong perspective so she always needs confirmation of others to keep her falsely-built identity from breaking into pieces.²¹

In addition, the mistress’ letter that clarifies who Florens belongs to and the purpose of the trip has the same symbolic meaning. “With the letter I belong and am lawful. Without it I am a weak calf abandon by the herd, a turtle without shell, a minion with no telltale signs but a darkness I am born with ...”²² So to her the importance of the letter outweighs everything during the trip. When she travels on a wagon in a freezingly cold weather: “I

¹⁷ Morrison, T. *A Mercy*. New York: Vintage, 2008.

¹⁸ Morrison, T. *A Mercy*. New York: Vintage, 2008.

¹⁹ Morrison, T. *A Mercy*. New York: Vintage, 2008.

²⁰ Battista, C. & Sande, M. R. “‘Pecola and the Unyielding Earth’: Exclusionary Cartographies, Transgenerational Trauma, and Racialized Dispossession in *The Bluest Eye*.” *Studies in American Fiction*. 48.1 (2021): 61-79.

²¹ Morrison, T. *A Mercy*. New York: Vintage, 2008.

²² Morrison, T. *A Mercy*. New York: Vintage, 2008.

draw my feet under my skirt, not for warmth, but to protect the letter.”²³ Both the shoes and the letter create an illusive standpoint which is not based on who she really is and the shared experience of the African American and other colored women. The white are taken as the model the girl subconsciously imitates and also as the absolute power that can protect her in face of danger.

Florens' deep affection towards the blacksmith is another manifestation of her confusion in using the dominator's standpoint as her own. The girl falls in love with the free black man once he arrives in the farm to help build Jacob's grand house. There is no explanation in the book on the reason of this strong attachment. However, the incident of witnessing the mistress seeking comfort from the master reveals Florens' standpoint on human relation and her own life. One day, Rebekka is taking a bath outside the house with the assistance of Florens and Lina (a Native American who takes up the role of a mother to look after Florens in the farm) when a moose shows up at the edge of the wood. Though the moose does not show any interest in these people, Rebekka is scared and runs into Jacob's arms immediately.

What is she fearing, I ask. Nothing, says Lina. Why then does she run to Sir? Because she can, Lina answers. Sudden a sheet of sparrows fall from the sky and settle in the trees. So many the trees seem to sprout birds, not leaves at all. Lina points. We never shape the world she says. The world shapes us. Sudden and silent the sparrows are gone. I am not understanding Lina. You (the blacksmith) are my shaper and my world as well. It is done. No need to choose.²⁴

As a white woman and an European immigrant who is sold by her father to Jacob as a wife, Rebekka's experience indicates “a masculinist framework that privileges males as architects of the American domain”.²⁵ Men represent absolute power while females are the weak whose safety solely depends on males' protection and guidance. This dominant

²³ Morrison, T. *A Mercy*. New York: Vintage, 2008.

²⁴ Morrison, T. *A Mercy*. New York: Vintage, 2008.

²⁵ Strehle, S. “ ‘I Am a Thing Apart’: Toni Morrison, *A Mercy*, and American Exceptionalism.” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*. 54.2 (2013): 109-123.

standpoint deeply roots in Rebekka's mind driving her to take an instinctive response of seeking help from her husband when there is danger. However, though all women, colored or white, are under patriarchal oppression in this new world, as a white Rebekka still has the privilege over the colored. "She can" implies not only the limited freedom that a white woman possesses within this masculinist framework which at least safeguards the relationship between her and her husband, but also the plight of the colored women because they are deprived of the right to maintain a normal and healthy interpersonal relationship. Here Morrison uses symbolic images of sparrows and trees to indicate this helpless situation of the colored women. As trees, they are shaped by the outside forces, like the sudden arrival and departure of sparrows, and are powerless to either reject or change what happens. Unfortunately, Florens fails to see the truth. She takes up the dominating masculinist standpoint, mistakenly assuming that men are the shaper of women and the world, so she voluntarily gives up her independence for a free black man, taking him as her "only protection".²⁶ However, slavery compartmentalizes all social life of slaves into a strict hierarchy thus "there is no value for human connection".²⁷ Without the knowledge of the special social position of a colored woman and its root, she believes that she "can" also establish and maintain a love relationship like a white woman.

Another scene in the story also uncovers her ignorance of slavery. Florens travels on a wagon with a group of poor people at the beginning of the journey. She listens to them talking about their suffering. "They are certain their years of debt are over but the master says no. He sends them away, north, to another place, a tannery, for more years. I don't understand why they are sad. Everyone has to work."²⁸ The dominating groups choose to ignore the oppression and inequity because they are essential for their privilege.²⁹ Influenced by this standpoint, the girl is unable to understand these people's position as

²⁶ Morrison, T. *A Mercy*. New York: Vintage, 2008.

²⁷ Collins, P. H. "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought." *Social Problems*. 33.6 (1986): 14-32.

²⁸ Morrison, T. *A Mercy*. New York: Vintage, 2008.

²⁹ Wood, J. T. "Feminist Standpoint Theory and Muted Group Theory: Commonalities and Divergences." *Women and Language*. 28.2 (2005): 61-72.

indentured servants, mistakenly equalizing slavery with voluntary and beneficial work because she does not see the economic oppression that plagues the people like her. As a result, the truth about what really happens to the dominated people is concealed.

Florens takes the discrimination of the dominators as the truth of the world, which becomes the base of her identity.³⁰ But this standpoint is based on a wrong perspective so it is unstable and can be easily demolished. Her shoes are robbed by a woman on the voyage to her new owner in America. She loses Sir's boots at the end of the life-saving trip in the blacksmith's house. The mistress's letter is taken away by some white villagers during the trip. Finally, her obsession with the blacksmith also comes to an abrupt end violently because she realizes that she is less important to him than a little black boy Malaik. But the loss of the old belief means the emergence of a new standpoint. The trip to find the blacksmith is not only to cure her mistress Rebekka of smallpox that has killed Jacob, but also to save herself by destroying her old understanding of the world and life and replacing it with a new perspective in viewing herself and other marginalized people.

4. Daughter Jane

There are two important incidents in the trip that completely reshape Florens' perspective in understanding her experience and social position. The first is the time when she encounters Widow Ealing and her daughter Jane in a village. After Florens is forced to get off the wagon, she travels alone in the wood for some time and then reaches a Christian village, where a white woman, Widow Ealing, provides the girl food and shelter. It is the beginning of Florens' transformation. Widow Ealing's daughter Jane, though she is a white teenager, is marginalized by other villagers because "one of her eyes looks away, the other is as straight and unwavering as a she-wolf's".³¹ Her mother has to whip her and show her wounds and blood to the villagers to prove that she is not a demon. At night, Florens

³⁰ Schreiner, S. "Naming, Identity and Intersectionality in Toni Morrison's *Sula*, *Beloved* and *A Mercy*." *English Academy Review*. 36.2 (2019): 38-48.

³¹ Morrison, T. *A Mercy*, New York: Vintage, 2008.

overhears the conversation between the mother and the daughter: "... how I can prove I am not a demon, ... It is the pasture they crave, Mother."³² Daughter Jane's words unveil the reason of her being condemning as a demon – by demonizing the girl, the villagers want to take away their property. Money and profit by private owners are the root of not only slavery, but also many other kinds of oppression in a capitalist society on the marginalized people, including Daughter Jane, a powerless white girl. This knowledge sheds light on the often overlooked perspectives of marginalized individuals, and at the same time enlightens Florens with new knowledge about the world she lives in as she thinks "it is a good thing to know ... these things".³³

Daughter Jane in the story plays the role of an Outsider Within. Outsider Within is an important concept in Collin's black feminist standpoint theory that is used to "describe social locations or border spaces occupied by groups of unequal power".³⁴ If a person is outside of the dominant group, but at the same time intimately close to that group so that he can gain understanding by observation, he can claim the identity as an Outsider Within. Therefore, Outsider Within status produces "potential for epistemic privilege" through "intellectual and political engagement of the oppressed with each other and with other groups".³⁵ As an outsider, he can reflect on the experience of their own and people like them. As someone within the privileged groups, he can observe and interpret the reigning sociological worldview, which is dominated by white male insiderism, and see anomalies in the society.³⁶ For these reasons, new and probably more accurate knowledge about both the dominators and the dominated is generated to challenge the taken-for-granted sociological assumptions about the outsiders. Daughter Jane is a member of the privileged

³² Morrison, T. *A Mercy*, New York: Vintage, 2008.

³³ Morrison, T. *A Mercy*, New York: Vintage, 2008.

³⁴ Collins, P. H. "Reflections on the Outsider Within." *Journal of Career Development*. 26.1 (1999): 85-88.

³⁵ Hundleby, C. "Feminist Standpoint Theory as A Form of Naturalist Epistemology." PhD diss., The University of Western Ontario, 2001, https://must.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/853MUST_INST/4n97dq/cdi_proquest_journals_304771672.

³⁶ Collins, P. H. "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought." *Social Problems*. 33.6 (1986): 14-32.

group. However, her eye problem isolates her from the other white people. This situation gives her the Outsider Within status so that she understands Florens with empathy for her situations, which is in a sharp contrast to the other white girl from the village who takes fright when she sees Florens simply because of the color of her skin. Instead, Daughter Jane is willing to take a risk of saving her. At the same time, she knows better than Florens, though they are similar in age, about the sociological truth beneath the surface. As mentioned above, unlike Florens who believes that there is no difference among the work the dominant people and the dominated people do, Daughter Jane's Outsider Within status enables her to know about the real reason of the condemnation of her being a demon - economic oppression. The new country is based on marketplace that values property over human. This knowledge she possesses also drives her to stop Florens from praying before breakfast. "At the end (of whispering the prayer) I raise my hand to touch forehead and catch Daughter Jane's frown. She shakes her head meaning no."³⁷ Under the guise of religion that should advocate love and kindness to everyone, there are domination and oppression. The hypocrisy of religion is the second knowledge that she passes to Florens.

Another knowledge that comes from Daughter Jane is how she challenges the external definition of her identity. According to Collins, self-definition is one of the key elements in black feminist standpoint theory.³⁸ Being condemned by her people as a demon, Daughter Jane is not controlled by this definition. After the traumatic experience in which Florens is examined by a group of white villagers like an animal or anything but not a human being, Daughter Jane smells the danger that is coming to Florens, so she secretly helps her to escape from the village. When they depart, Florens asks her whether she is a demon. "Her wayward eye is steady. She smiles. Yes, she says. Oh, yes. Go now."³⁹ Instead of a confession, what Daughter Jane says is more like a challenge. Her steady eye shows that a person's identity should not be imparted by others, but created and approved by

³⁷ Morrison, T. *A Mercy*. New York: Vintage, 2008.

³⁸ Collins, P. H. "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought." *Social Problems*. 33.6 (1986): 14-32.

³⁹ Morrison, T. *A Mercy*. New York: Vintage, 2008.

oneself. So this “yes” is not an affirmative to the question “are you a demon”. It is to challenge and transcend the limiting categories and expectations placed upon her so that she can stand up to fight against the existing oppression and define who she is independently.

The knowledge starts to shift Florens’ perspective in understanding herself in this hostile society. When she is back to her journey, Florens senses the change she undergoes.

I walk alone except for the eyes that join me on my journey. Eyes that do not recognize me, eyes that examine me for a tail, an extra teat, a man’s whip between my legs. Wondering eyes that stare and decide if my navel is in the right place if my knees bend backward like the forelegs of a dog. They want to see if my tongue is split like a snake’s or if my teeth are filing to points to chew them up. To know if I can spring out of the darkness and bite. Inside I am shrinking. I climb the streambed under watching trees and know I am not the same. I am losing something with every step I take. I can feel the drain. ... (there is) a darkness I am born with, outside, yes, but inside as well and the inside dark is small, feathered and toothy.⁴⁰

What happens here reflects the process of the girl’s self-definition. Similar to the demonization of Daughter Jane, black women have been objectified for a long time which causes their dehumanization and the exploitation of their labor. These externally-defined negative images become the stereotypes that deprives a black woman of the right as a human being. However, it is invisible to Florens until now. She starts to realize the existence of the controlling images, and her old standpoint collapses. She loses her mistress’ letter here. But more importantly, the perspectives from which she formerly understands this world and that shapes her identity is challenged by the newly gained knowledge from Daughter Jane. To replace the stereotypical images, “the inside dark” that is “small, feathered and toothy” starts to grow.

⁴⁰ Morrison, T. *A Mercy*. New York: Vintage, 2008.

5. The blacksmith

The second incident that marks Florens' transformation is what happens when she finally arrives at the blacksmith's house. The knowledge Florens gains from Daughter Jane only leads to the beginning of the formation of her self-defined standpoint, and the actual content of the definitions is still incomplete. As Collins states, "it is one thing to counsel Afro-American women to resist the Sapphire stereotype ... (but) it is quite another to advise Black women to embrace their assertiveness, to value their sassiness, and to continue to use these qualities to survive in and transcend the harsh environments that circumscribe so many Black women's lives."⁴¹ Florens has not yet formed a positive, assertive, and stable standpoint on her black womanhood. It is shown in her dream in which she is attracted by perfume to a beautiful lake. But when she leans and looks at the lake, she cannot see her face in it. "Where my face should be is nothing."⁴² Then Daughter Jane suddenly shows up kneeling next to her. "Oh, Precious, don't fret, she is saying, you will find it."⁴³ The missing face symbolizes the absence of a self-defined identity. Florens cannot embrace herself as an independent woman because at that time she is still obsessed with the blacksmith, taking him as her sole meaning in life. "With you my body is pleasure is safe is belonging."⁴⁴ But Daughter Jane's appearance in the dream implies Florens' final transformation to become her own "Precious". That is her self-valuation. While self-definition involves the act of denying the assumption that deprives black women of the power as human subjects, self-valuation pushes it "one step further" as it "addresses the actual content of these self-definitions".⁴⁵ It refers to the act of recognizing and affirming one's own worth and value as an individual so that black women can "create their own

⁴¹ Collins, P. H. "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought." *Social Problems*. 33.6 (1986): 14-32.

⁴² Morrison, T. *A Mercy*. New York: Vintage, 2008.

⁴³ Morrison, T. *A Mercy*. New York: Vintage, 2008.

⁴⁴ Morrison, T. *A Mercy*. New York: Vintage, 2008.

⁴⁵ Collins, P. H. "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought." *Social Problems*. 33.6 (1986): 14-32.

standards for evaluating Afro-American womanhood and value their creations".⁴⁶

Although what happens later is devastating to the girl, it also marks the beginning of self-valuation. A little black boy in the blacksmith's house, Malaik, reminds her of her mother keeping her brother and abandoning her years ago. There is a violent fight between Florens and the blacksmith when the man is back from the trip to save Florens' mistress and finds that Malaik is injured by Florens accidentally.

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.

What?

You heard me.

Sir makes me that.

I don't mean him.

Then who?

You.

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

No. You have become one.

How?

Your head is empty and your body is wild.

I am adoring you.

And a slave to that too.

You alone own me.

Own yourself, woman, and leave us be. You could have killed this child.

No. Wait. You put me in misery.

⁴⁶ Collins, P. H. "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought." *Social Problems*. 33.6 (1986): 14-32.

You are nothing but wilderness. No constrain. No mind.⁴⁷

The blacksmith also plays the role of an Outsider Within. As a free black man, the blacksmith has access to two different worlds – the world of the dominated and the world of the dominators. But it should be noted that due to his special identity he is also considered as an outsider in both worlds. Though he can work side by side with Jacob like “his brother”, he is outside the dominant world because of the color of his skin.⁴⁸ Though he is black, he is also excluded by slaves because the fact that he “was being paid for his work” and “the statue of a free African” rankles other slaves in the farm.⁴⁹ Due to his double Outsider Within statue, the blacksmith shows Florens a new way of understanding slavery. As it is shown in the above conversation, the blacksmith does not define slavery as racial inequality and oppression. Instead, he refers to it as an intrapersonal confinement. So one can “become” a slave for the reason of an “empty” head, a “wild” body and a reckless craving for love. This definition of slavery is, obviously, with problems as the fundamental reason of slavery – the economic, social, sexual, and racial inequality and oppression – is discounted. However, it is still partially right, especially to Florens whose standpoint is constructed not on the basis of her racial identity and her life experiences as it is mentioned in the previous section. When one is not able to change the present situation, he can learn to own himself, understanding who he really is and becoming strong in this hostile world. When the blacksmith shouts to Florens “embrace yourself”, he teaches her the knowledge of being independent, though this lesson is ended abruptly and violently – Florens psychically hurts the blacksmith and escaped from his house. “Feathers lifting, I unfold. The claws scratch and scratch until the hammer is in my hand.”⁵⁰ If the emergence of the girl’s self-awareness, symbolized by the feathers and claws, starts when she encounters Daughter Jane, it continues to grow and shows its power now.

⁴⁷ Morrison, T. *A Mercy*. New York: Vintage, 2008.

⁴⁸ Morrison, T. *A Mercy*. New York: Vintage, 2008.

⁴⁹ Morrison, T. *A Mercy*. New York: Vintage, 2008.

⁵⁰ Morrison, T. *A Mercy*. New York: Vintage, 2008.

6. Florens' writing

Florens' self-valuation is finally completed, which is reflected in the writing of her story on the floor of her dead master's mansion that is built by the blacksmith and now abandoned by her mistress.

I am remembering what you tell me from long ago when Sir is not dead. 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. That it is the withering inside that enslaves and opens the door for what is wild. I know my withering is born in the Widow's closet. I know the claws of the feathered thing did break out on you because I cannot stop them wanting to tear you open the way you tear me. Still, there is another thing. A lion who thinks his mane is all. A she-lion who does not. I learn this from Daughter Jane. Her bloody legs do not stop her. She risks. Risks all to save the slave you throw out. ... 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.⁵¹

This confession indicates a new standpoint and a new definition of herself as a subject. She is no longer the girl with "combination of defenselessness, eagerness to please and, most of all, a willingness to blame herself for the meanness of others".⁵² At that time she accepts, and also desires others to accept her enslaved status because slavery used to be a vague term to her meaning nothing but undifferentiated labor. But the trip and the encounters with two Outsiders Within arm Florens with knowledge on women and slaves and how these two identities can be unified in her. Daughter Jane shows Florens the necessity of resisting the externally-defined controlling stereotype, and the strong will that a seemingly weak girl can possess; on the other hand, the blacksmith pushes Florens' evolution one step further by revealing the possibilities of achieving independence, freedom and inner power in slavery when there is no guarantee of safety for a slave girl.

⁵¹ Morrison, T. *A Mercy*. New York: Vintage, 2008.

⁵² Morrison, T. *A Mercy*. New York: Vintage, 2008.

What Florens gains from Daughter Jane and the blacksmith are only parts of a picture as their statues are not identical to Florens'. Daughter Jane is a woman but not black; the blacksmith is black but not a woman. But when the two are placed together, a distinctive standpoint of a black woman is formed. As a result, Florens is transformed from "an ass" to "a lion", or to be more specific, "a she-lion". Without "mane", "shoes", or other forms of protection, Florens has to be always ready to fight back to protect herself. Finally she succeeds – "the docile creature ... had turned feral" and "the soles of my feet are hard as cypress".⁵³ Now she understands how slavery, white supremacy and patriarchy dehumanize her, giving her the wilderness with claws and feather that the blacksmith despises. But this experience of an African female slave is an inseparable part of her life. Denying it means the devaluation of her subjectivity. With this new perspective of seeing what happens on her, Florens identifies with this wilderness and finally embraces her ethnic identity, which "represent Floren's coming into her own sovereignty ... (and) her authority".⁵⁴

Florens' self-valuation is about constructing not only her individual identity, but also the collective memory of African female slaves. It is reflected in her act of inscribing. Jacob's beautiful grand mansion, which he builds after he accumulates fortune from the exploitation of slave labor, is an embodiment of slavery culture. It symbolizes the slave owners' striving for money and social status, enforcing the conception that the new continent is a white notion. In addition, it reveals "the development of a culture based on marketplace (that) values corrupts and undermines the human value of all races, classes, genders, and sexualities".⁵⁵ But the memory of the later is suppressed because the sociological worldview has long been dominated by white males so slaves are marginalized thus voiceless. As Morrison states,

What was distinctive in the New (World) was, first of all, its claim to freedom and,

⁵³ Morrison, T. *A Mercy*. New York: Vintage, 2008.

⁵⁴ Carlacio, J. "Narrative Epistemology: Storytelling as Agency in *A Mercy*." in *Toni Morrison: Paradise, Love, A Mercy*. Ed. L. P. Fultz. (London:2013): 129-146.

⁵⁵ Babb, V. "*E Pluribus Unum?* The American Origins Narrative in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*." *MELUS*, 36.2 (2011): 147-164.

second, the presence of the unfree within the heart of the democratic experiment – the critical absence of democracy, its echo, shadow, and silent force in the political and intellectual activity of some non-Americans.⁵⁶

Florens' inscribing of her traumatic memory in the house gives a voice to the people like her who have been defined as "rawness and savagery" and thus not human.⁵⁷ "Florens' inscription imprints the colonialist monument with an African stamp and disintegrates the claimed legitimacy of the evil slavery."⁵⁸ By adding a slave's perspective on slavery to the mainstream white patriarchal sociological knowledge, Florens' standpoint shows to the readers a real picture of the history that is distinct from the white male's worldview, reminding us of "untaught American history, why it is untaught, but also why it is never to be repeated."⁵⁹ This new knowledge of the past may guide countless marginalized colored women to situate oppression in relation to hegemonic social structure and finally define and evaluate their identity.

7. Conclusion

Florens' story clarifies the standpoint of and for a black woman. The girl used to be confined by the white males' definition of the sociology, mistakenly understanding herself and her experience from a dominator's perspective, which is represented by the shoes that she craves and her mistress' letter that labels who (what) she is. Then a trip into the wild in search of a savior/lover marks her change – the old standpoint is replaced by a new understanding of her place in the world. Though the evolution seems spontaneous, caused by some traumatic experiences the girl encounters during the trip, it will not be achieved

⁵⁶ Morrison, T. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: Vintage/Random, 1993.

⁵⁷ Morrison, T. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: Vintage/Random, 1993.

⁵⁸ Quan, Z. "Cultural Memory and Ethnic Identity Construction in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*." *Journal of Black Studies*. 50.6 (2019): 555-568.

⁵⁹ Moore, G. C. "A Demonic Parody: Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*." *The Southern Literary Journal*, XLIV.1 (2011): 1-18.

without the assistance from two Outsiders Within. Under the influence of Daughter Jane and the blacksmith, who provide her insight into the dehumanization that is essential to the systems of domination, she begins to form a distinctive standpoint by self-defining and self-valuating her definition of Afro-American womanhood. What she learns from Daughter Jane is the knowledge about capitalism and patriarchy that prioritizes property over human beings, providing the girl the strength to deny the stereotypical external definition of her identity. It marks Florens' self-definition. But her standpoint is incomplete until she learns from the other Outsider Within the blacksmith. The lessons from the blacksmith directs the girl to evaluate her old self and construct a positive, assertive, and stable standpoint so that she can embrace her racial identity. Finally, the girl resists the externally-defined negative images and abandons the old knowledge about her and her people, replacing them with an independent, fearless, genuine ethnic identity that eventually leads to her spiritual freedom. In addition to the individual significance, her standpoint can influence other Afro-American women and the world. Symbolized by her writing on the floor of her dead master's mansion, her new knowledge is etched into the history that is mostly written by white males and thus marginalizes and silences the others, crushing arbitrary oppositions that lets one single interpretation dominate.

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