

Are They Friends? Cross-Racial Female Relation in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy**

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Abstract: From a black feminist perspective, especially Narayan's theory on "epistemic privilege", the paper examines the cross-racial female relation in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*, focusing on two pairs of friends – Lina and Rebekka, and Florens and Daughter Jane. In each relation, the two women, who are in different racial and class backgrounds but are both outcasts of the hierarchic society in the colonial new land, make an attempt to form a bond with each other. However, the relations head to opposite directions and end differently. The friendliness between Lina and Rebekka does not turn into a political solidarity because they are outsiders of the knowledge of "epistemic privilege" they respectively own, and their relation is greatly influenced by patriarchy and supremacy. On the contrary, Florens and Daughter Jane develop an interdependent and reciprocal relation as they bear witness to each other's untold misery, which leads to their denial of being defined by the dominators and assimilated by supremacist notions. Their friendship bridges the racial differences, functioning as the healing power to help them seek for subjectivity and political solidarity against the same social oppression upon them. Through these two pairs of friends, Morrison illustrates the difficulty as well as the possibility of forming cross-racial sisterhood in slavery. The openness to the women of other races and the willingness of building connection with the other may not only give birth to a female community on the basis of equality and mutual benefits but also contribute to their personal growth and identity construction.

Keywords: *A Mercy*; Epistemic privilege; Cross-racial female relation; Solidarity; Identity construction

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1. Introduction

Toni Morrison's ninth novel *A Mercy* is about a pre-racial time in American history when slavery is at dawn.¹ Capitalism takes roots and different cultures start to be assimilated into one new American culture at that time. The protagonist is a young black woman called Florens, who is traumatized by her mother's abandonment and then is brought back to a farm by a white landowner Jacob Vaark as an act of mercy. The loss of maternal love and its psychological impact on the young girl is a continuation of the thematic exploration –the mother-daughter relation – that Morrison repeatedly revisits in many of her writings, especially her earlier novel *Beloved* in which a mother kills her daughter to protect her from a life of violence in slavery. Florens' story is supplemented and extended by the narration of other characters that are traumatized in similar ways: Lina, a Native American woman who is orphaned by the diseases brought by the colonists and then enslaved to the white; Sorrow, a hybridized orphan that becomes the victim of sexual abuse; Rebekka, a mail-order bride from England who is given up by her parents and later is widowed after the death of her husband; Jacob, an European orphan and a landowner who aspires to accumulate capital and establish a reputation as a member of the elite but fails due to his sudden death from smallpox; Scully, an indentured white man, who is sold into slavery by his father, and whose servitude, as well as Willard's (another indentured white male servant), is always stretched and becomes endless. All these people are orphans being marginalized in a small farm, which they take as a refuge. But without the legal recognition from the colonial society, the bond among them is so fragile that when the veil of a seemingly supportive community is removed these people are left separately alone to concern about their own future. As Anderson points out, "because of slavery and indentured servitude, all social life is compartmentalized into a strict hierarchy, and every boundary is

¹ Morrison, T., *A Mercy*. (New York: Vintage, 2008).

policed ... (thus) there is no value for human connection.”²

All these characters experience isolation and marginalization in *A Mercy*. In fact, Morrison indicates that one of the themes of the book is to reflect “American individuality” and to show the dangers of it.³ The haunting trauma of slavery undermines every relation among these people, especially women. It is true that the bonding among black women and its healing power is important to the survival of black women in Afro-American culture, which is exemplified in most of Morrison’s writings, such as *Beloved*, *Sula*, *Paradise*, *Song of Solomon* and *Home*. In *A Mercy*, this kind of bonding does not exist and the colored women in the farm are separated individuals heading for different directions for their own freedom.⁴ But it does not mean that the importance of female community is undermined. In fact, the author changes the focus and extends the scope to the bonding among women of different races in this novel. In an interview, Morrison explains that her “assumed responsibilities” as a novelist is to make writing “thinkable, possible, doable, for others – other African Americans and other women”⁵ so that “our emotional understanding of those marginalized women who appear in history only incidentally, as a line in a ship’s log, a slaveholder’s inventory, or a letter home” can be deepened.⁶ She not only gives a voice to the white women to unveil their own suffering, but also bonds them with the colored women to show the possibility of forming a supportive and nurturing female community across races. By doing so, she also explores the significant role of cross-racial female friendship in personal growth and identity construction. Morrison once points out the importance of women’s friendship as a theme of her writing in an interview.

... the world knows that women don’t choose each other’s acquaintanceship. They

² Anderson, M. R., *Spectrality in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2013).

³ Morrison, T., Toni Morrison discusses *A Mercy*: interview with Lynn Neary in 2008. Accessed September, 8, 2023. <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=95961382>.

⁴ Anderson, *Spectrality in the Novels of Toni Morrison*.

⁵ Fultz, L. P., “Introduction: The Grace and Gravity of Toni Morrison.” in *Toni Morrison: Paradise, Love, A Mercy*. Ed. L. P. Fultz. (London: 2013): 1-19.

⁶ Logan, L. M., “Thinking with Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy*.” *Early American Literature* 48.1 (2013): 193-199.

choose men first, then women as second choice. But I have made women the focal point of books in order to find out what women's friendships are really all about.⁷

Morrison brings into the novel two pairs of friends – Rebekka and Lina, and Daughter Jane and Florens. Both involve a white woman and a colored woman, and they are all outcasts of the society due to patriarchy and supremacy. But the relations head to opposite directions and end differently: one becomes hostile while the other becomes friendly. What the friends experience together shows to the readers the difficulties and the possibility of establishing an interdependent and reciprocal relationship between white and colored women, as well as how the relations either undermine or strengthen their resistance to oppression.

Female bonding across races is important as it allows women to recognize and appreciate the unique struggles faced by women of different racial backgrounds so that they can work together to address them. From a feminist perspective, my reading focuses on the relation between white women and colored women – the relation between Rebekka and Lina, and Daughter Jane and Florens – in order to identify the cross-racial female bonding and the consequences of such relation. It argues that there is a way for all women, no matter what colors of their skins are, to form solidarity against hierarchy in class and race, and the friendship can contribute to the women's personal growth and identity construction.

2. Epistemic privilege and cross-racial female friendship

Sisterhood, an important feature of black women's culture,⁸ is "generally understood as a nurturant, supportive feeling of attachment and loyalty to other women".⁹ It has been considered as an essential interpersonal relation among colored women as they are linked by the shared experience of falling victim to the dual oppression from the white and the

⁷ McKay, N., "An Interview with Toni Morrison." *Contemporary Literature* 24.4 (1983): 413-429.

⁸ Collins, P. H., "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought." *Social Problems* 33.6 (1986): 14-32.

⁹ Dill, B. T., "Race, Class, and Gender: Prospects for an All-Inclusive Sisterhood." In *100 Years of Women's Suffrage: A University of Illinois Press Anthology*. Ed. D. Durante. (Illinois: 2019): 177-196.

patriarchal society. Because the collective identities of African-American women “have largely been formed around issues of race”,¹⁰ sisterhood hardly extends beyond racial boundaries, especially in the relation with white middle-class women who enjoy economic and political privilege that excludes black women and other women of color. The unequal relation between white women and colored women is most apparent in domestic household where white women depend on colored slave women for sustenance of status as mistress by exerting power over them.¹¹ There is a phenomenon that in feminist movement we cry for the union and liberation of all women, while at the same time the solidarity is confined within racial groups.¹²

From a feminist point of view, it is important to achieve mutual understanding among women of different races, especially between white women and colored women, because their experiences are inevitably shaped by the intersection of their gender, race, ethnicity, and other social identities. Recognizing and understanding the challenges faced by women with different racial backgrounds can create solidarity and empowerment to challenge systemic inequalities. Narayan, a prominent feminist and philosopher known for her work on cultural identity, ethics, and the intersections of gender and race, emphasizes the need for a more reciprocal understanding among women from different racial groups so that the insights and contributions of all women can be valued, regardless of their geographical or cultural background.¹³ However, mere resolution cannot bond the two since the hostility has existed for quite a long time. Narayan, pointing out that “good-will is not enough”, uses a feminist notion of the “epistemic privilege of the oppressed”, which is rooted in standpoint theory firstly developed by Martstock and Harding in the 1980s,¹⁴ to explain

¹⁰ Dill, B. T., “Race, Class, and Gender: Prospects for an All-Inclusive Sisterhood.” 177-196.

¹¹ Broeck, S., “Property: White Gender and Slavery.” *Gender Forum: An Internet Journal for Gender Studies* 14 (2006): 1-12.

¹² Dill, B. T., “Race, Class, and Gender: Prospects for an All-Inclusive Sisterhood.” 177-196.; Hooks, B., *Writing beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice*. (New York: Routledge, 2013).

¹³ Narayan, U., “Sisterhood and ‘Doing Good’: Asymmetries of Western Feminist Location, Access, and Orbits of Concern.” *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 5.2 (2019): 1-26.; Narayan, U., *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third World Feminism*. (New York: Routledge, 1997).

¹⁴ Hundleby, C., “Feminist Standpoint Theory as A Form of Naturalist Epistemology.” (PhD diss. The

the difficulties for women of different races, especially the more advantaged group (white women) and the more disadvantaged group (colored women) to bond.¹⁵ By recognizing the problems of dialogue between women of heterogeneous backgrounds, where women can be insiders to “specific forms of oppressive social structures – racism, sexism, compulsory heterosexuality, etc.” and outsiders to other forms of oppression, Narayan explains that “members of an oppressed group have a more immediate, subtle and critical knowledge about the nature of their oppression than people who are non-members of the oppressed group”.¹⁶ Because the oppressed insiders’ epistemic privilege is not shared by the outsiders, they tend to understand oppression in very different ways which may lead to failure of communication between members of the two groups. This idea is shared by hooks who argues that racism is a barrier to solidarity between white women and colored women, especially between black and white female relationships, as they have different cultural backgrounds and political experiences.¹⁷ Because of race privilege, white women discriminate against and oppress black women so it is very difficult for the exploiters and the exploited to fight side by side as a solidarity. Racism is not the only factor according to hooks. Another barrier is sexism. “While sexism teaches women to be sex objects for men, it is also manifest when women who have repudiated this role feel contemptuous and superior in relation to those women who have not.”¹⁸ Male domination not only victimizes all women, but also causes hatred among women themselves.

However, it does not mean that solidarity between white women and colored women is unachievable. Narayan argues that solution lies in the awareness of the “epistemic

University of Western Ontario, 2001), v,
https://must.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/853MUST_INST/4n97dq/cdi_proquest_journals_304771672.

¹⁵ Narayan, U., “Working Together across Difference: Some Considerations on Emotions and Political Practice.” *Hypatia* 3.2 (1988): 31-47.

¹⁶ Narayan, U., “Working Together across Difference: Some Considerations on Emotions and Political Practice.” 31-47.

¹⁷ Hooks, B., “Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women.” In *Feminism and Community*. Eds. P. A. Weiss & M. Friedman. (Philadelphia: 1995): 293-315.

¹⁸ Hooks, B., “Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women.” 293-315.

privilege” of both insiders and outsiders. She elucidates four aspects of the concept that are prone to misinterpretation, thereby deriving implications for the solution.¹⁹ First, insiders may have the immediate knowledge of everyday life under oppression, but being oppressed does not guarantee a thorough understanding of cause and the system behind it. Second, outsiders, with great efforts and sympathy, can understand the experiences and knowledge of insiders. Third, insiders’ epistemic privilege does not rule out the possibilities that their knowledge of oppression is wrong. Four, insiders should speak for themselves whether they have epistemic privilege or not because it indicates autonomy, identity and self-respect. Therefore, cross-racial female solidarity requires mutual efforts. Outsiders should practice “methodological humility” and “methodological caution” when communicating with insiders, while insiders should realize the difficulties outsiders may have in understanding the oppression, and help them get to know the epistemic privilege of the oppressed.²⁰ Similarly, hooks proposes mutual understanding and accommodation as the ways to overcome the barriers to achieve solidarity.²¹ She believes that all women, white or colored, should affirm their diversity by exploring “various ways to communicate with one another cross-culturally”,²² including genuine understanding “rooted in a rejection of dominator culture” and mutual dialogue with “a spirit of resistance ... when women dare to speak truth together” to “create the foundation for a true and lasting feminist-based sisterhood”.²³

Lugones questions the use of sisterhood to describe the relationship between white women and colored women as she points out that sisterhood only exists in an egalitarian relationship.²⁴ While there are hierarchies and inequalities among women of different

¹⁹ Narayan, U., “Working Together across Difference: Some Considerations on Emotions and Political Practice.” 31-47.

²⁰ Narayan, U., “Working Together across Difference: Some Considerations on Emotions and Political Practice.” 31-47.

²¹ Hooks, B., *Writing beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice.*; Hooks, B., “Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women.” 293-315.

²² Hooks, B., “Sisterhood: Political Solidarity between Women.” 293-315.

²³ Hooks, B., *Writing beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice.*

²⁴ Lugones, M., “Sisterhood and Friendship as Feminist Models.” In *The Knowledge Explosion: Generations of Feminist Scholarship*. Eds. C. Kramarae. & D. Spender (New York: 1992): 406-412.

racism based on factors such as race, class and privilege, inclusive sisterhood can never be achieved. Thus, another concept to refer to the bonding among women across races is proposed – friendship. “Friendship is a kind of practical love that commits one to perceptual changes in the knowledge of other persons” and it emphasizes mutual understanding, particularities of each person, and conditional love.²⁵ The key element is plurality, which requires women of different races to understand the racial, cultural, and political differences between them and the others so that “a multivocal communication, a dialogue among multiple selves” can be constructed.²⁶ As it is shown that though hooks and Lugones use different terms (“sisterhood” / “friendship”) to refer to the solidarity between white and colored women, the ideas share similarities – they all underline the importance of mutual understanding and cross-racial communication. That is why this paper, overlooking the definitional differences between the two, uses “sisters” and “friends” interchangeably to mean a positive and supportive relationship in the discussion of solidarity between white women and colored women.

3. Lina and Rebekka

Morrison in *A Mercy* describes two paired of cross-racial friends – Lina and Rebekka, and Florens and Daughter Jane – through which the author shows to the readers the effect of racism and patriarchy on women during the early slavery era, and the difficulty as well as the possibility of establishing a positive and reciprocal relation between white women and colored women.

Rebekka and Lina are linked within a domestic household, which reflects a stereotypical relation between a white mistress and a colored servant within the colonial plantation where their statuses are closely connected.²⁷ In the story, their relationship changes from hostility to friendliness, and then back to hostility. Lina is a spiritual and

²⁵ Lugones, M., “Sisterhood and Friendship as Feminist Models.” 406-412.

²⁶ Lugones, M., “Sisterhood and Friendship as Feminist Models.” 406-412.

²⁷ Spatzek, S., *Unruly Narrative: Private Property, Self-Making, and Toni Morrison's A Mercy*. (Boston: De Gruyter, 2022).

timeless maternal figure that represents cultural tradition and memory,²⁸ and she resembles many earthy Native American women and Black women in literature,²⁹ such as Eva in *Beloved*, and Pilate in *Song of Solomon*. After being purchased by Jacob, and before the arrival of Rebekka, she is the one that takes care of the household and farming. “Together they (Jacob and Lina) minded the fowl and starter stock; planted corn and vegetables. But it was she who taught him how to dry the fish they caught; to anticipate spawning and how to protect a crop from night creatures.”³⁰ However, what she does to the farm is not appreciated by the wife in the first place. When Rebekka arrived at the farm, “the health and beauty of a young female already in charge annoyed the new wife; while the assumption of authority from the awkward Europe girl infuriated Lina.”³¹ This “hostility” between the two women is not personal, but the result of patriarchal and colonial influence. For Lina, Rebekka belongs to the white supremacist group (“Europe”), representing the oppression that Lina has witnessed and experienced since the arrival of colonialism (“authority”). But this racial privilege owned by a European is not the only reason that causes the hostility between the women. Rebekka sees Lina as a potential sexual temptation (“health and beauty”) to her husband Jacob, and a threat to the power she is assumed to possess as the mistress of the place (“already in charge”). Lina challenges her status that is bestowed upon her by Jacob, the owner of the farm. She even points it out plainly later that one of the reasons for them being companions is that “both had to please one man”.³² Rebekka is not reading Lina and herself as independent women, but appendages of men. How Lina and Rebekka think of each other when they first meet reflects the two barriers proposed by hooks that stop white and colored women from forming a positive relationship – the racial exploitation and male supremacist values.

²⁸ Zhou, Q., “Cultural Memory and Ethnic Identity Construction in Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy*.” *Journal of Black Studies* 50.6 (2019): 555-568.

²⁹ 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.

³⁰ Morrison, T., *A Mercy*.

³¹ Morrison, T., *A Mercy*.

³² Morrison, T., *A Mercy*.

Though it does not take a long time for the two to abandon the feeling of hatred and become what they call themselves “friends”, this change is not based on mutual understanding and recognition of class and race hierarchies, but a practical need. It is a necessity for survival because of the harsh farming life, as Lina says that “the fraudulent competition (between her and Rebekka) was worth nothing on land that demanding”,³³ and Rebekka states that it is “the result of the mute alliance that comes of sharing tasks”.³⁴ It is true that gradually the two develop some sort of intimacy, and they become “company for each other and by and by discovered something much more interesting than status”.³⁵ However, this personal intimacy does not lead to solidarity in the interest of challenging the class and race hierarchies that isolate the two women. First, politically the unequal social status between the two remains unchanged. Though Rebekka claims that Lina is an important person “whose understanding she trusted and whose judgment she valued”,³⁶ after the death of “the best husband”,³⁷ Rebekka believes that she is left alone in the farm with “no one except servants”,³⁸ including Lina, the one she claims that she values as a friend. To Rebekka, the personal friendliness does not change the hierarchical differences, and she believes that she is, no matter what, superior to a slave woman. Second, Lina’s “epistemic privilege” is not shared with Rebekka. In one scenario when Rebekka takes a bath outside the house with the assistance with Lina and Florens, she is frightened by the sudden appearance of a moose at the edge of the wood. Though the animal does not show any interest in these people, Rebekka runs into Jacob’s arms immediately for comfort.

What is she fearing, I (Florens) 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

³³ Morrison, T., *A Mercy*.

³⁴ Morrison, T., *A Mercy*.

³⁵ Morrison, T., *A Mercy*.

³⁶ Morrison, T., *A Mercy*.

³⁷ Morrison, T., *A Mercy*.

³⁸ Morrison, T., *A Mercy*.

points. We never shape the world she says. The world shapes us.³⁹

Rebekka's first reaction to the potential danger shows the male supremacist value that dominates the new world, indicating "a masculinist framework that privileges males as architects of the American domain".⁴⁰ Male represents power and authority while female is mere subordinate under a man's domination. This notion affects all women, white or colored. However, white women still possess privilege over the colored women. A white woman is protected within this masculinist framework as long as she yields to the domination. "She can" implies that women like Lina "can't" – the colored women are vulnerable to different forms of violence and oppression. As Florens' mother repeats four times in her chapter, "there is no protection"⁴¹ for slave women. This miserable situation of the colored women is represented by symbolic images of sparrows and trees in this scene. These women are like trees being shaped by the outside forces, and they can neither reject nor change what has happened or will happen on them like the sudden arrival and departure of sparrows. This is Lina's "epistemic privilege", the knowledge that she learns through her experience as a slave and is not shared with her white mistress. What's more, as Spatzek indicates, she does not dare to share because it might overstep the hierarchic bounds and challenge her white owners, especially her mistress, that she takes as a protection.⁴² That is why even though she sees the "folly" and the danger of a seemingly stable community in the farm because "pride alone made them (Jacob and Rebekka) think that they needed only themselves", she chooses to be silent.⁴³ Rebekka, on the other hand, is an outsider of this "epistemic privilege", who does not understand the class and race hierarchies and the difference those hierarchies create between her and Lina.

Third, emotionally, Rebekka does not make any effort to have empathy for Lina's

³⁹ Morrison, T., *A Mercy*.

⁴⁰ Montgomery, M. L., "Got on My Traveling Shoes: Migration, Exile, and Home in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*." 627-637.

⁴¹ Morrison, T., *A Mercy*.

⁴² Spatzek, S., *Unruly Narrative: Private Property, Self-Making, and Toni Morrison's A Mercy*.

⁴³ Morrison, T., *A Mercy*.

situations. It is reflected in another scenario when Rebekka asks Lina about her past love relation, Lina reveals her mental and physical suffering: “Not good. Not good, Miss. ... I will walk behind. I will clean up after. I will not be thrashed. No.”⁴⁴ But the misery does not arouse Rebekka’s empathy for her friend, but only reminds her of her own happiness – she has a loving husband, a healthy daughter, and a still living baby boy, and what’s more, “other than her mother, no one had ever struck her”.⁴⁵ When explaining the ways to form solidarity between advantaged and disadvantaged groups, Narayan emphasizes the responsibility of both groups in building up positive cross-racial communication. For the oppressed, the insiders who has “epistemic privilege” about their oppression, they should “educate” the outsiders to help them understand the oppression they endure, as outsiders have no other ways to learn about the situations of insiders; but it is more important for concerned outsiders to “actively seek out and acquire such knowledge” instead of seeing the oppression as the insiders’ problem.⁴⁶ Rebekka is a concerned outsider because she is the one who takes initiative to ask Lina for her past experience, and Lina, the insider, reveals this oppressive past to her. Unfortunately, this communication leads to neither mutual understanding of the two, nor political bonding against patriarchy because Rebekka fails to stand in Lina’s shoes to comprehend the oppression. Instead, it becomes a reference to highlight her own happiness and then strengthen her superior position. Thus, the communication between these two friends is actually ineffective and the hierarchies lie between them remain unchanged.

It foreshadows the end of the story: the relation of the two heads back to hostility. After the death of Jacob, Rebekka recovers from smallpox that almost kills her, realizing that she is now in a dangerous situation: without a white man taking charge of the farm, she has no one (except colored people) to count on and the farm may be taken away from her. She chooses to rejoin the white community as a way to save herself, and gradually

⁴⁴ Morrison, T., *A Mercy*.

⁴⁵ Morrison, T., *A Mercy*.

⁴⁶ Narayan, U., “Working Together across Difference: Some Considerations on Emotions and Political Practice.” 31-47.

becomes hostile towards the colored servants, especially Lina.

Worse is how Mistress is to Lina. She requires her company on the way to church but sits her by the road in all weather because she cannot enter. Lina can no longer bathe in the river and must cultivate alone. I am never hearing how they once talk and laugh together while tending garden.⁴⁷

Though what alters Rebekka's attitude towards Lina is not explained explicitly in the story, the hypocritical sisterhood between the two may be a possible way to comprehend this change. There might be personal intimacy in the past, but it never forms a solidarity that truly unites the women of two different races. Rebekka's hostility is not a result of a sudden change, but an extension of what she always believes in – the colored and the white women are hierarchically different. In face of the crisis of being taken away the limited privileges she possesses and becoming illegal without a man, Rebekka turns to the spiritual community of white, which she has always been remotely connected with. She abandons her friend for material advantage, who she has always taken as a loyal servant and nothing more.

Lina's "epistemic privilege" that is not shared by Rebekka is one of the reasons why the two cannot reach a mutual understanding. Another reason is that Rebekka fails to undertake the attempt to meet the requirement of "methodological humility" and "methodological caution". According to Narayan, "methodological humility" means that the outsider should always sincerely assume that she misses something and does not take it as a mistake on the part of the insider; "methodological caution" means that the outsider should sincerely avoid denigrating or dismissing the validity of the insider's perceptions.⁴⁸ These two are essential if members of two groups that are hierarchically different want to form a solidarity against supremacy and patriarchy. Unfortunately, Rebekka, as an outsider

⁴⁷ Morrison, T., *A Mercy*.

⁴⁸ Narayan, U., "Working Together across Difference: Some Considerations on Emotions and Political Practice." 31-47.

of Lina's "epistemic privilege", meets neither requirement. Instead, she internalizes the supremacist belief that breeds hierarchy in class and race, placing herself in a higher social position in a female community with colored women, which makes her "a representation of white female claims to co-mastery at the New World colonial scene".⁴⁹ Thus, the so-called "friendship" comes to an end, or to be more specific, has never existed.

4. Florens and Daughter Jane

Though both Lina and Rebekka claim that the other is a "friend", they ultimately remain isolated. This failure of establishing friendship or sisterhood shows the difficulties of forming cross-racial female bonding. However, Morrison inserts another pair of friends in the story to represent the hope.

Jane is the daughter of Widow Ealing who provides shelter to Florens when the girl is on her way to find the blacksmith for her dying mistress. Like Rebekka, Jane is a member of the dominator as the family owns a pasture in a Christian village. She is marginalized by the mainstream white society because of her wayward eye: "one of her eyes looks away, the other is as straight and unwavering as a she-wolf's."⁵⁰ Florens plays the role of a domestic servant like Lina in the relation. After breakfast with Widow Ealing and her daughter, she voluntarily cleans all the bowls and spoons. But unlike Rebekka who not only falls victim to the patriarchal society but also internalizes the oppressive social beliefs, Jane refuses to be assimilated. Though her physical anomaly is read by the townspeople as a demonic sign, and she is forced to have her legs whipped by her mother constantly in the hope that her blood can be the proof of her humanity, Jane rejects the others' interpretation on who she is. She turns to a different way to understand her body and her identity. Bowen states that Jane uses blood to relate human with animal because bleeding is a feature shared by human with animals but not with spiritual beings like a demon.⁵¹ If both animal and

⁴⁹ Spatzek, S., *Unruly Narrative: Private Property, Self-Making, and Toni Morrison's A Mercy*.

⁵⁰ Morrison, T., *A Mercy*.

⁵¹ Bowen, L., "Learning to Read Ecologically: Disability, Animality, and Metaphor in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*." *ELH* 88 (2021): 525-550.

human being have blood running in their bodies, they must be similar as creatures. The boundary between human and animals disappear in this new interpretative mode, and in this way, a vulnerable girl is changed into a “she-wolf”. This figuration provides her the power to define herself. More importantly, it indicates harmonious relation and equality of human and animals. It is the opposite to the hierarchic belief that human beings are superior to animals, as shown in Lina’s story about a man crying “mine, mine, mine” when he faces the nature, claiming everything as his own property.⁵² If the boundary between human and animals can be removed, so can the racial differences.

Roseneil states that “friendship is never outside the relations of power which shape the social world, neither is it ever fundamentally contained or defined by the core social institutions of family, work, and nation.”⁵³ It shows the multiplicity of friendship and the possibility of connecting differences. Although racial hierarchy is a barrier in Rebekka and Lina’s relation, it does not hinder the development of sisterhood between Jane and Florens. Jane never looks at Florens from a superior position. She shows no interest in the color of Florens’ skin and does not care to whom she belongs. Instead, Jane takes Florens as another outcast of the society just like herself and shares with her knowledge that is essential to understand the origin of oppression and their present situation. She not only voluntarily exposes her own vulnerability – the wounds on her legs – to a black girl she meets for the first time, but also shares with her (though it is done unintentionally) the real reason of her being cast out of the community. Florens overhears the conversation between the mother and daughter at night when Jane says that the townspeople condemn her as a demon because they crave the pasture of the family. This knowledge of the white patriarchal society that prioritizes money and property enlightens Florens, as she confesses that “... it is a good thing to know ... these things”.⁵⁴ What’s more, being a victim of the religious and white supremacist dogmatism, Jane also stops Florens from doing the morning praying.

⁵² Morrison, T., *A Mercy*.

⁵³ Roseneil, S., “Foregrounding Friendship: Feminist Pasts, Feminist Futures.” In *Handbook of Gender and Women’s Studies*. Eds. K. Davis, M. Evans, & J. Lorber (London: 2006): 322-341.

⁵⁴ Morrison, T., *A Mercy*.

“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.”⁵⁵ It is the second knowledge that she passes to Florens – the hypocrisy of religion. In this colonial context, religion is manipulated and used to justify exploitation by the dominator. Under the guise that should advocate love and kindness to everyone indiscriminately, there are oppression and deception that perpetuate slavery and colonialism.

Being someone with “epistemic privilege” does not imply that the oppressed know the causes of their oppression.⁵⁶ “Our relation to social power produces forms of blindness just as it enables degrees of lucidity.”⁵⁷ They have the first-hand experience, but they may not be able to develop these experiences into explanatory theories because most of the oppressed do not have the access to education and theory production. Florens is an example. Though she is a victim of racial oppression as she is traded in exchange for a debt, forced to be separated from her mother, and deprived of subjectivity and freedom, she does not know the political and economic reasons behind all these. She knows she is a slave; but she does not know what this identity means. This is illustrated in the incident at the beginning of her journey when she travelled with a group of indentured men and women. “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.”⁵⁸ It is the first time she goes outside of the seemingly safe community in the farm. Without the knowledge of slavery, she is ignorant of the oppression and inequality that plagues people like her. The encounter with Jane and the knowledge Jane passes to her is critical, enabling her to look inwards – her identity as a slave, her experience, and the “epistemic privilege” – from a new perspective. Playing the role of an “Outsider Within”

⁵⁵ Morrison, T., *A Mercy*.

⁵⁶ Narayan, U., “Working Together across Difference: Some Considerations on Emotions and Political Practice.” 31-47.

⁵⁷ Mohanty, S. P., “The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity: On *Beloved* and the Postcolonial Condition.” *Cultural Critique* 24 (1993): 41-80.

⁵⁸ Morrison, T., *A Mercy*.

according to Collins' black feminist standpoint theory,⁵⁹ Jane enlightens Florens about the complexities of power, morality, and identity in a colonial context. Compared to the so-called friendship between Rebekka and Lina in which they are still positioned in hierarchically different social classes after what they have experienced together, Jane and Florens share a relation that is more like a solidarity. It should be noted that what Jane does is more than just sharing knowledge. She also takes a risk to save the girl from a potential danger.

There is a traumatic moment that has a great impact on Florens' psychological development. A group of white villagers visit Widow Ealing's house to scrutinize whether Jane is indeed a demon, but their attention is immediately turned to Florens when she enters the room. A great distress is caused by her "black" and being "Afric", which is amplified by a little white girl's "shaking and moaning".⁶⁰ This uneasiness is similar to Rebekka's first impression on Lina which is affected by her racial traits – "... she (Rebekka) bolted the door at night and would not let the raven-haired girl with impossible skin sleep anywhere near"⁶¹. Unfortunately, though Rebekka gradually develops a personal closeness towards Lina, she remains her superior social position and makes efforts to keep it that way. However, Jane challenges this supremacist interpretation on a human being and then tries to break the hierarchical boundaries. First, she understands Florens' "epistemic privilege" as an outcast because she has a similar experience of being marginalized, and more importantly, she witnesses Florens' desperation in this traumatic moment – she is in the same room when Florens is identified by the white villagers as Satan's minion. Florens is later taken to a closet and shamefully examined nakedly by the white women, which is interpreted as the moment when Florens is "dehumanized, and objectified – differentiated, not only from them (the white villagers) but from all living species".⁶² It is very likely that

⁵⁹ Collins, P. H., "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought." 14-32.

⁶⁰ Morrison, T., *A Mercy*.

⁶¹ Morrison, T., *A Mercy*.

⁶² Strehle, S., "'I Am a Thing Apart': Toni Morrison, *A Mercy*, and American Exceptionalism." *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 54.2 (2013): 109-123.

Jane knows what happens in the closet too because she is there when all the “quarreling” and discussion concerning Florens occur afterwards. This first-hand experience of witnessing Florens being dehumanized and herself being dehumanized by the same white supremacist notion enables Jane to make an emotional and political connection with the girl of different race. Thus, Jane becomes a reliable ally. She is the only one that voices defiance by making “a small sound” while the white villagers are all “quiet” thinking about how they would deal with Florens.⁶³ She is also the only one that takes a risk to set Florens free. A reciprocal solidarity between these two women is formed.

I (Florens) say thank you and lift her hand to kiss it. She (Jane) says no, I thank you. They look at you and forget about me. She kisses my forehead then watches as I step down into the stream’s dry bed. I turn and look up at her. Are you a demon I ask her. Her wayward eye is steady. She smiles. Yes, she says. Oh, yes. Go now.⁶⁴

How Florens and Jane are condemned as demons reflects a dark history of Salem witchcraft trials in the 17th century in which many innocent women were accused of witchcraft and then executed.⁶⁵ The shared experience gives birth to a sense of empathy and interdependence that transcend all barriers, making the two girls each other’s saviors. Florens’ appearance removes, at least temporarily, the vicious attention on Jane; Jane helps Florens to escape, pointing out the way for her to complete her mission (finding the blacksmith) and more importantly triggering her psychological evolution – it is after the encounter with Jane that Florens’ “inside dark (that) is small, feathered and toothy”⁶⁶ starts to grow.

⁶³ Morrison, T., *A Mercy*.

⁶⁴ Morrison, T., *A Mercy*.

⁶⁵ Bross, K., “Florens in Salem.” *Early American Literature* 48.1 (2013): 183-188.

⁶⁶ Morrison, T., *A Mercy*.

5. Cross-racial female friendship and identity construction

By depicting the cross-racial female relationships between characters such as Lina and Rebekka, and Florens and Daughter Jane with complexity and nuance, the author challenges and expands the readers' understanding of race and sexuality in early America, where unique American culture and hierarchies are not yet fully formed. More importantly, the theme of interdependence suggests the fluidity of identity construction for the marginalized women.

From the perspective of “epistemic privilege”, one's cultural identity is defined through the unique insights and perspectives that marginalized individuals gain from their social positions.⁶⁷ As Mohanty indicates, “identities are ways of making sense of our experiences ... that enable us to read the world in specific ways.”⁶⁸ However, although insiders of “epistemic privilege” have the first-hand experience in oppression, this experience might be misunderstood or misinterpreted, and as a result, they may get lost in dominant narratives, as it is illustrated in these women's stories. In *A Mercy*, Morrison proposes that the mutually beneficial friendship between women from different racial groups offer them a way to get to know the society and their positions in it in a more comprehensive way, empowering them to understand and challenge social inequalities from intersecting perspectives, which in turn aids in the establishment of their own identities. For Daughter Jane, the witness of Florens being dehumanized drives her to confront the white community by rescuing the black girl who had been abandoned by almost everyone. Although the story's ending leaves Jane's future unspecified, the act of salvation implies that she will probably put an end to the physical abuse she receives from her mother, and stop using scars and blood to prove her humanity. In addition, she will probably refuse to let others – the dominant white culture – to define who she is. When she confirms her identity to Florens as a “demon”, it is not the evil one condemned by the

⁶⁷ Narayan, U., *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third World Feminism*.

⁶⁸ Mohanty, S. P., “The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity: On *Beloved* and the Postcolonial Condition.” 41-80.

dominant but a free, strong and confident creature defined by herself.⁶⁹ Similarly, this relationship enables Florens' transformation from a timid black girl into a strong black woman, from an abandoned orphan to a self-loved "Precious", and from "an ass" into "a she-lion".⁷⁰ More importantly, the shared epistemic privilege with Daughter Jane triggers Florens' construction of her identity as one of the African-American women. It is reflected the writing of her traumatic memory on the floor of Jacob's mansion, an embodiment of slavery culture marked by suffering and oppression.⁷¹ By adding narratives from the perspective of an insider, who not only has the epistemic privilege of the oppressed but also is enlightened by an outsider's insights, to the dominant racial and patriarchal sociological knowledge, Florens situates the oppression that she has experienced in relation to hegemonic social structure which finally enables her to define who she really is culturally.⁷²

Unfortunately, the relationship between Rebekka and Lina does not bring about similar personal transformation. Rebekka continues to seek refuge within the hierarchy of white supremacy and patriarchy, willingly forsaking the opportunity to independently manage a farm and become a self-reliant woman. From Willard and Scully's conversation at the end of the story, we know that she will probably marry again, to someone provided by the white community. Lina, on the other hand, remains in a state of servitude to her mistress as a slave, offering no resistance even when faced with Rebekka's hostility. They are still trapped in the roles of the oppressed, unable to break free from the confinement.

6. Conclusion

A Mercy depicts a world where anyone can be enslaved and victimized by different overarching social forces. It is also about a time when a women's community, white or

⁶⁹ Cao, L. Y., "A Black Woman's Standpoint in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*." *The Journal of Macau University of Science and Technology* 18.2 (2024): 65-88.

⁷⁰ Morrison, T., *A Mercy*.

⁷¹ Zhou, Q., "Cultural Memory and Ethnic Identity Construction in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*." 555-568.

⁷² Cao, L. Y., "A Black Woman's Standpoint in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*." 65-88.

black, has not yet been formed and everyone is individualized with separate concerns for his/her fate. All four women – Lina, Rebekka, Florens and Jane – are disconnected as outcasts because of their inability to fight the constraints of a society that is hierarchized by sex, class and race. To seek support in order to survive this hostile society, they automatically bond with the women that they are readily close to: a white mistress/a colored domestic servant. But from the relation between Lina and Rebekka, and the relation between Florens and Jane, Morrison shows the difficulties as well as the possibility of forming such cross-racial sisterhood, and its importance in constructing one's identity.

Although Lina and Rebekka intimately call each other “friend”, their friendliness never develops into a solidarity that truly units the two women of different races. The knowledge of Lina's “epistemic privilege” is unknown to her white mistress, who at the same time shows no interest in it. Instead, Rebekka dismisses the possibilities of bonding with another woman of different race by clinging to her superior position as the dominator in this relation and thus making Lina remain a dispensable appendage of her property so that her limited legal privileges are protected. Nothing is changed and no one is saved in this relation. On the contrary, Florens and Jane develop a relation beyond the demarcations of race and class. They both are witnesses of how each other is treated inhumanly and rejected by the dominating society, which provides them the first-hand experience of the “epistemic privilege” they respectively own. This kind of sisterhood bridges the racial differences, functioning as the healing power to help both of them seek for subjectivity as well as political solidarity against the social oppression upon them. It indicates that the openness to the women of other races and the willingness of building connection with the other may give birth to a female community on the basis of equality and mutual benefits.

The study on the portrayal of cross-racial female friendships in *A Mercy* is significant because it offers a new perspective on the exploration of feminist topics in Morrison's works, through which it helps foster understanding and respect between women with different racial and cultural backgrounds. What's more, it enriches the theory of epistemic privilege by suggesting that the knowledge and insights gained from supportive and reciprocal friendship, like the one between Florens and Daughter Jane, can provide a unique

and valuable understanding of societal issues that is not accessible through dominant cultural lenses. However, the study has its limitations. It mainly focuses on the interpersonal dynamics between white and colored women in the novel, so the discussions on the complexity of each individual female character and other female relationships are either insufficient or ignored. There is also a lack of in-depth analysis of the broader social context. Future research will delve into these aspects for a more comprehensive exploration.

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