



Repercussions of Gendered Migration in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*

Deepanshi Gupta

Amity University, Haryana

Dr Sapna Sharma

Amity University, Haryana

Abstract: This paper examines Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008) in terms of its encounter with migration, displacement, exile, and homelessness as found in the four women characters. Built upon the idea of social reproduction propounded by Eleonore Kofman and Parvati Raghuram, the paper aims to depict the gendered aspect behind migration and how the female body is employed for the labour of care, family maintenance, and social caretaking at large. Furthermore, the argument extends to the theme of memory and trauma as an intergenerational bridge aptly shown between Florens and her mother. Herein, the paper employs Homi Bhabha's key contribution of a hybrid identity that remains at the crux of both belonging and not belonging. Overall, the paper engages with the gendered identities present in Morrison's *A Mercy* and comments on how their labour operated within a set masculine order.

Keywords: engendered migration, intergenerational migration, diaspora, memory, trauma

Introduction

Migration is one of the oldest phenomena, often driven by the imperatives of economic expansion and capital accumulation. It has existed since time immemorial, leaving its mark on many generations to come. The notions of migration, displacement and transnational dislocation remain quite common among African communities, but anywhere in the world. They are inarguably the largest migratory group in history to move voluntarily or involuntarily to Europe and the United States. Their earliest large-scale movement took place during slavery, wherein Africans were manipulated to migrate to the American states under the false promise of better life opportunities. However, this coerced migration resulted in a long history of trauma and pain



due to their life-long servitude as bonded labourers. Slavery is considered as the darkest chapter in the lives of African communities who had to forego their homeland and shift to a foreign land to meet the growing greed of colonisation of Western countries. Enslaved Africans were uprooted from their socio-cultural spaces and subjected to dehumanising conditions of inexplicable control. While forced migration into slavery inflicted many sufferings on all individuals, its impact could be deeply distinguished as gendered. In other words, Black African women had to undergo disproportionate pain and trauma during slavery. Additionally, it lasted even after many years of emancipation among the daughters of Black slave women. They carried the burden of sexual violence, reproductive control and forced labour throughout their lives. Thus, the involuntary migration of Black women into slavery led to their oppressive control as mere wombs and hands. On the one hand, their wombs were abused to procreate slave labourers, on the other, their maternal rights were denied to practice the labour of care on their children.

Migration, therefore, is experienced differently by different genders. This means a journey from home to a host country is likely to be significantly different depending on an individual's sex, thereby impacting their survival, return or escape. Yet until the 1950s and 60s, the scholarly research on migration studies solely focused on masculine experiences while overlooking gendered perspectives. For example, the text *Lives of their Own: Black, Italians and Poles in Pittsburgh, 1900-1960* (1982), partially documented male immigrants, believing them worth studying. Their record either generalised the gendered issues or merely discussed the female immigrants under the confines of family, home, etc. Such disregard resulted in a lack of nuanced perspectives on gender relations vis-à-vis migration studies, leaving women's experiences largely under represented. It is only after the momentum of the feminist movement that varied views gained a foothold which represented engendered realities within migration theory. As made clear by Eleonore Kofman and Parvati Raghuram (2015), feminist interventions seeped into migration studies and opened a broad spectrum for understanding the global transformations taking place over centuries. In their formative text, *Gendered Migrations and Global Social Reproduction*, the authors bring in the lens of social reproduction that is associated with labour of care, family maintenance, and reproduction of women which help sustain



economic demands. As defined, “Social reproduction involves both men and women as providers and recipients of labour of care. Gender relations influence the nature of social reproduction, how it is divided and performed and who pays for it and where” (7).

In another argument by Chad Broughton in their article “Migration as Engendered Practice: Mexican Men, Masculinity and Northward Migration” (2008), the gendered factors behind labour migration are further discussed. Broughton explains:

What is often left out of economic and social demographic studies of migration, however, is an analysis of how migrants make sense of the migration experience and how their strategic responses to economic dislocation are shaped not just by instrumental calculation but also by a knotty set of gendered cultural considerations: prevailing normative expectations and standards, social roles and obligations, and shared understandings relating to family, work and place (569).

Broughton’s view highlights how an individual’s sex permeates migration. While men migrate to fulfil their prescribed role as breadwinners, women migrate primarily as care labourers due to their biology. Even though migration improved women’s employability, it remained constrained by biological determinism. Not just that, it operated within an exploitative patriarchal structure that uprooted the familial bonds between mothers and their children. In this light, women’s migration during slavery may be understood as deeply entangled with gendered assumptions about their bodies and reproductive roles. Their movement was not just influenced by socio-economic needs but regulated through control over their labour, bodies and motherhood. The following sections would elucidate this idea and critically examine the choices behind women’s migration or their children’s migration within the context of Morrison’s *A Mercy* (2008).

A Mercy

Published in 2008, *A Mercy* is Toni Morrison’s ninth novel. This novel is set as back as in the 1690s at the onset of the slave era. Although majority of Morrison’s oeuvre portrays the history of slavery in the lives of African Americans, this novel gained recognition due to its portrayal of major racial migrant identities, including African, Native American, Mullato, etc.



The narrative centres on Florens, a migrant daughter of an enslaved Black woman. Her story is framed by her inner struggle to make sense of the apparent rejection by her mother who trades her to Jacob Vaark in place of herself and her baby boy. This wounded incident frames the narrative and Floren's psyche, only ending with her mother's explanation at the end. However, her message never reaches Florens and she continues to exist feeling dejected. Like Florens, other characters have also been displaced from both their homes and their close ones. They all share a history of engendered migration mainly because of their feminine bodies. Therefore, the world of this novel is a common one of displacement in which the characters remain detached from their primary bonds yet are forced to perform them within a dominant racial system.

Migration as a gendered phenomenon in *A Mercy*

Florens' displacement occurs when her mother (minhamae) gives her away as a commodity in place of herself and her baby boy. Knowing very well her master's intention and her traumatic experiences at D'Ortega's farm, she decides to barter her daughter away in the hope of safeguarding her from forced rapes and thereby giving birth to innumerable slaves. Here, a mother giving away her daughter speaks of the denial of maternal rights imposed upon Black enslaved women. Just like the mothers themselves, their children were subject to ownership. Additionally, the daughters had more value as both labourers and reproductive beings. This becomes the mother's sole reason to trade off Florens to Jacob Vaark as she remarks, "I said you. Take you, my daughter. Because I saw the tall man see you as a human child, not pieces of eight" (158). Her plea comes from her own vulnerable experiences as a Black migrant woman who learned, "how I was not a person from my country, nor from my families. I was negrita. Everything. Language, dress, gods, habits- all of it cooked together in the color of my skin" (157). Marianne Hirsch (1989) explained that the separation of mother and child in the economy of slavery distorted the self and what it means to have a family. This disjunction becomes a mode of survival, especially for enslaved daughters who were bound by gendered vulnerabilities. Therefore, looking at her engendered migratory journey, Floren's mother chooses separation as a way to shield her daughter from such abuse. Through minhamae's response, Morrison intertwines the idea of migration with maternal rights. In the novel, Morrison highlights the violation of



maternal rights of the migrants who ironically do the labour of care and social reproduction. Floren's mother was denied any legitimate control over her children, thereby taking away her rights as their sole nurturer and preserver.

Similarly, Lina also paints the identity of a gendered migrant subject who takes care of Vaark's farm and its inhabitants as the senior-most slave. Her character is shown as a caring individual with all her wisdom and a healing touch. While analysing Lina's characterisation in the article "Got on My Traveling Shoes: Migration, Exile, and Home in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*" (2011), Maxine L. Montgomery remarks:

Lina is first to arrive at Vaark's farm, suggesting her preeminent position as an ageless, timeless, all-wise maternal figure. She is not only a gifted storyteller but also a healer and midwife as she carries out the practices that invite a comparison between the earthy American Indian woman and rural Black women in literature and life (630).

Montgomery's view sheds light on another engendered migrant on Vaark's farm. Lina, a Native American, moved to the farm in search of employment and a better life. Displaced in her own homeland, Lina had to forego her socio-cultural roots to assimilate with the European colonisers. She holds superiority over other slaves, yet is burdened by the demands of her gender to provide care and healing. Lina's case aptly shows the intermingling of gender with social reproduction as she works to create a semblance of familial stability in Vaarks' household. Her maternal care nurtures Florens and helps Rebekka Vaark heal; however, her own spatial and emotional belonging remain precarious. In addition, her indigenous identity is compromised by a gendered role as a caregiver. In a way, Lina uproots herself from her socio-cultural world at every step as she provides for everyone else.

The one who is completely oblivious to her identity is Sorrow. Morrison draws Sorrow's character as a mystery whose ethnic identity, migratory trajectory and familial ties are uncertain. Sorrow cannot recall her past and is unable to situate herself within any stable history of belonging like other immigrants. Her displacement is so profound that it erases her complete sense of self, making her an outcast in Vaark's household. She is held responsible as a bad omen behind the premature deaths of Rebekka's children. Moreover, she is withheld from getting into



the intimate bond shared by three other women. In the essay “Women-Centered Diaspora in Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy*” (2023), Qianqian Li opines, “For Sorrow, the passage from the sea to the land signifies not her salvation but the continuation of her diaspora. Even on Jacob’s farm, Sorrow remains isolated and fails to establish any close relations with other women. Diaspora is a basic way of her existence and the fundamental condition of her life” (328). Li’s suggestion depicts that Sorrow remained subjected to sexual violence, more so due to her intractable roots. However, her identity gets legitimacy after giving birth to a daughter.

Sorrow’s wandering stopped too. Now she attended routine duties, organizing them around her infant’s needs, impervious to the complaints of others. She had looked into her daughter’s eyes; saw in them the gray glisten of a winter sea while a ship sailed by-the-lee. “I am your mother,” she said. “My name is complete.” (134)

Another engendered migration shown in the novel is of Rebekka’s. Her movement closely aligns with her race and class as she attains the status of a wife. Belonging to a poor white family, her parents sent her away to marry and establish a home for herself in a new land. Rebekka’s story highlights how migratory status closely aligns with one’s class and race. Even though she becomes a white farmer’s wife, Rebekka never could make an equal space with him. Again, her role as a wife at the farm strictly binds her to the gendered labour of care, producing Vaark’s heir and ensuring the smooth functioning of her husband’s household while he is away on business. The power play of Rebekka’s whiteness allowed her an upper hand over other slaves. However, she herself was owned by Jacob Vaarks. This dual aspect is clearly stated in “Reading Race and Power in Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy*” (2024), as the author sheds light on Rebekka’s privilege as a white but her lack of autonomy as a white migrant woman. “Her position and power are derived through her husband and through her whiteness. Jacob has also purchased Rebekka, so she is in a subservient position to him, but she is not at all in the same social or economic positions as the three enslaved women” (124).

Memory and trauma of migration

As discussed in the above section, the repercussions of migration are gendered, thus evoking the emotions of memory and trauma in the same network. It is important to note that



memory and trauma are transmitted through generations. And in the case of migrant women, they are passed down from mothers and foremothers. Similarly, in the novel, both the concepts of memory and trauma shape the gendered experiences of women migrants. Their movement caused a psychological rupture that consists of blurred memories of the past and sometimes, including the trauma of their foremothers as well. Within this context, the idea of a hybrid identity could be examined. Hybrid identity constitutes several appropriations and categories. As explained in the essay, “Migration and the Creation of Hybrid Identity: Chances and Challenges” (2016):

As typical elements of hybrid identity the following characteristics are mentioned: multiple cultural backgrounds, experience exchange between self and external assignment also the ongoing process of own identities negotiation. The central feature of the hybrid identity is the belongingness, which may take various forms (242).

In *A Mercy*, Morrison aptly shows the construct of hybrid identity. Characters like Florens struggle to get a hold of their belonging in relation to their mother. Her memory is blurred, and all she can recall is the barter her mother made. This memory solely guides Florens’ traumatic experience of migration that renders her alone in a foreign land. In addition, their gap reveals how migration disrupts Florens’ knowledge of the maternal, leaving her to reconstruct her identity through recollections, trauma and socio-cultural bearings.

Conclusion

This paper discusses the presence of distinct feminine experiences in migration studies that often go missing from the mainstream narrative. Through Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy*, a counter-discourse to male-centred narratives of displacement can be put forward. This is because the diaporic stories presented in the novel speak of the feminine and their gendered experiences of displacement, survival and escape. Undoubtedly, Morrison consciously chooses the female migrants as her protagonists to mark entry into the masculine framework of migration studies. In addition, the author explores how gender operates within migrant identity and limits them to strict roles associated with femininity. As seen in every female migrant in the novel, they are subservient to the masculine. Furthermore, they perform gendered tasks as part of their labour.



What's more is the disruption of their bonds, particularly maternal. Thus, migration produces a lasting emotional and physical rupture in which one's connection to one's roots is completely lost. As Florens' mother confesses in the last chapter, "To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below" (155).

References

- Bodnar, J., Weber, M., & Simon, R. (1982). *Lives of their own: Blacks, Italians, and Poles in Pittsburgh, 1900–1960*. University of Illinois Press.
- Broughton, C. (2008). Migration as engendered practice: Mexican men, masculinity, and northward migration. *Gender & Society*, 22(5), 568–589. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27821678>
- Kofman, E., & Raghuram, P. (2015). *Gendered migrations and global social reproduction*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Li, Q. (2023). Women-centered diaspora in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*. *Women's Studies*, 52(3), 320–338. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00497878.2022.2145478>
- Mitchell, A. (2024). Reading race and power in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*. *Early American Literature*, 59(1), 121–128. <https://doi.org/10.1353/eal.2024.a918910>
- Montgomery, M. L. (2011). Got on my traveling shoes: Migration, exile, and home in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*. *Journal of Black Studies*, 42(4), 627–637. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934710390691>
- Morrison, T. (2008). *A Mercy: A novel*. Random House.
- Wagner, C. (2016). Migration and the creation of hybrid identity: Chances and challenges. *Harvard Square Symposium*, 2, 237–255.

Author's Biography

Deepanshi Gupta is a PhD scholar at Amity University, Haryana. Her area of interest lies in Women's Writings, mainly from the lens of motherhood studies. She has completed her MPhil in English from Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, Delhi in which she worked on the narratives of Mahasweta Devi and Arundhati Roy to depict the inhumane conditions of marginal sections of the society. Currently, she is teaching as a guest faculty at Sri Guru Gobind Singh College of Commerce, University of Delhi.