

Dismemberment in the Fiction of Toni Morrison

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By

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P U B L I S H I N G

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In loving memory of Sir Abdul Qayyum Lambray

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INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison develops her narratives through an interactive dialogue between various voices and perspectives. Similarly, she encourages the reader to study her fiction from the interrelationship between or dialogization of different perspectives. According to Rachel Lister, the interaction between multiple voices, discourses and themes makes the whole enterprise of reading her novels “improvisational” (Lister 14). *Dismemberment in the Fiction of Toni Morrison* is a multifaceted study of Morrison’s fiction. It explores the theme of dismemberment from multiple perspectives—historical, psychological and cultural. Dismemberment refers to the experience of racism as being like acts of amputation, phantom limbs, splitting, torture and even traumatic memories in more concrete and graphic terms. This helps Morrison to render the painful bodily impact of racism in realistic terms. It also helps her to evince a visceral response from her readers.

My study is partly motivated by Morrison’s own approach to addressing issues of literary, social, historical and political import from multiple perspectives. For example, in Morrison’s review of “Who is Angela Davis?” by Regina Nadelson, she rejects Nadelson’s biography because of its “Cyclopean view” (Goulimari 144). According to Morrison, the biography is “monperspectival” rather than “multiperspectival” (Goulimari 144). Morrison’s method of critiquing the biography encourages the reader to adopt a similar approach to the study of her narrative strategies. Instead of building the narrative events from a single point of view, she narrates the stories from multiple viewpoints. This demands more attentive participation from the readers in deconstructing the meaning of her stories. Critics like Laurie Vickroy highlight the importance of studying Morrison’s fiction from multiple perspectives: “Morrison constructs for readers a process of looking at events from several perspectives that sometimes contradict each other, sometimes interlink or reinforce one another” (Vickroy 183). In fact, looking at the formation of subjectivity (under the traumatic forces of slavery, racism and social oppression) from different perspectives helps the reader to understand “the multiple nature of identity” (Vickroy 24). Besides, the motivation behind Morrison’s characters’ action is complex. In an

interview with Nellie McKay, Morrison states that what fascinates her most about the “qualities of black people is the variety of ways in which they come, and the enormous layers of lives that they live. It is a compelling thing for (her) because no single layer is “it”” (Interview 145). Morrison’s comments confirm the multidimensionality of her characters. She puts her characters under duress to see how they can survive and manage to exercise their autonomy under traumatizing conditions. Quite often, the nature of physical and psychological traumas results in “radical fragmentation or fracturing of the self” which makes it difficult to establish subjectivity (Ferguson 16). As a writer, Morrison is very much interested in depicting the effects of the trauma of racism on the psyche of her characters and the concomitant experiences of dismemberment. In her words, “The trauma of racism is, for the racists and the victim, the severe fragmentation of the self, and has always seemed to me a cause (not a symptom) of psychosis—strangely of no interest to psychiatry” (“Unspeakable” 16). Morrison’s comments foreground the importance of psychoanalytic responses to the trauma of racism and the resultant dismemberment. However, dismemberment has its roots in the historical and social realities of African Americans. This encourages the need to study the psychological impact of racism on Morrison’s characters through the lens of the historical and social realities which play a significant role. In her National Public Radio interview with Tavis Smiley entitled “Love,” Morrison points out that her writing is grounded in a “strong historical and cultural base in describing what impacts people, especially, maybe exclusively, African Americans” (Morrison “Love”). This implies that the characters in her fiction, who find themselves subject to experiences of dismemberment, do not have only one cause which affects the formation of their subjectivity. There are historical, psychological and social forces behind the dismemberment of the body.

This brings me to the overarching frame of my argument which follows the Fanonian premise of racial interpellation. According to Fanon, racial interpellation objectifies the black subject to the extent that his/her body is exposed to experiences of irrevocable dismemberment which reduce his/her subjectivity to the state of “an object in the midst of other objects” (*Black Skin* 82). Morrison’s fiction is replete with moments of Fanonian dismemberment. Like Fanon, she enacts moments of racial interpellation in terms of literal dismemberment. Her characters find themselves in combat with their image, which shatters their corporeality. Fanon’s appropriation of Jacques Lacan’s famous Mirror Theory and its (re)application in the colonial context is very helpful for understanding the relationship between the black and the white subjects. According to Lacan,

the mirror stage compensates for the lack of coherence, the loss of self-image and experience of bodily dismemberment in the early stages of one's life—between the ages of six and eighteen months. During this phase of experience, the mirror image provides the self with an image of its own coordination and unity. The limbs of the body are not felt to be alien or parts of the outside world. They are seen as parts of a unified self. This sense of unified self-hood is one of the most crucial defining moments in the development of subjectivity. According to Fanon contra Lacan, the mirror stage for the black man proves to be a process of racial othering. The formation of subjectivity or the orthopedic projection of the self is a construct of the mirror. Rather than enabling the subject to remember the self, the reflection of the mirror in the racial context results in the dismemberment of the self. The experience of racial alienation brings about multiple consciousnesses with their roots in the historical, social, cultural and political conditions. For Fanon, the advent of the mirror calls for a reconsideration of historical and social realities. Fanon seeks to establish a direct link between the psychological impact of racism and the other wider forces of historical and cultural oppression which alienate black people.

Studying the impact of racism from multiple perspectives enhances the ability to perceive things from a different range of perspectives. It helps the reader to understand that there is not just one cause determining the subject positions in Morrison's fiction. Morrison's characters try to free their consciousness from their collective racial past and other determinants which influence them from all directions—historical, psychological and social. Like Fanon's extrapolation of the lived reality of black existence, any attempt at resistance as an exercise for subjectivity ends in dismemberment: "the corporal schema, attacked on several points, crumble(s), giving way to a racial epidermal schema" (*Black Skin* 84). Fanon was a practicing psychiatrist who had first-hand knowledge of the harmful effects of colonial violence on the psyche of the colonized. He applies psychoanalysis, in theory and practice, in order to understand, like Morrison, the impact of racism on both the colonizer and the colonized. He describes the lived experience of being black as the lived experience of racism. For both Morrison and Fanon, the experience of racism is an experience of dismemberment—a splitting or dissolution of the self or the psyche. Like Fanon, Morrison highlights the importance of psychoanalysis in studying the impact of race. In her interview with Jaffrey, Morrison says that she "used to complain bitterly that psychiatry never considered race":

I remember saying that, you know, in the moment when you first realize you're a boy or a girl or your toilet training is this or whatever—all these little things that happen in our childhood—no one ever talks about the moment you found that you were white. Or the moment that you found out that you were black. That's a profound revelation. The minute you find that out, something happens. You have to renegotiate everything. (Interview 152)

Morrison's fiction works as a mirror in which the characters "renegotiate" their lives when faced with moments of racial alienation, interpellation and the resulting moments of dismemberment. Similarly, the experience of racism in the ontological world of Fanon makes it difficult for the body schema to adjust itself in the world. Fanon uses a graphic metaphor of amputation to suggest how the whole experience of racism can shatter the bodily schema creating a sense of deficiency and loss after he encounters the racial gaze: "What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood?" (*Black Skin* 85). He sums up the fragile sense of being as he encounters the racist gaze of the other in terms of "an amputation" (*Black Skin* 85). Morrison, like Fanon, exposes the harmful effects of the racist gaze which alienates the subject and reduces him/her to an object. Fanon describes the racial gaze of the Other as reducing the subject to a state of "crushing objecthood" (*Black Skin* 82). Morrison also highlights the debilitating effect of the racial gaze as it is internalized by the characters. It is the internalization of the racial gaze which results in the "double consciousness" or the split personalities of Morrison's characters. Like Fanon, she enacts racial alienation and the concomitant dismemberment as a multiple process which makes it important to look at her project from multiple perspectives. Examining the lived reality of African Americans from one perspective forecloses the possibility of looking at dismemberment in the light of the socio-political and historical realities of African American experience in the States. As Fanon suggests, racial alienation is not just an individual question, but also involves "sociodiagnostic realities" (*Black Skin* 11). This entails a reconsideration of the physical, historical, social and psychological realities.

Following the Fanonian premise, my study attempts to demonstrate that a psychoanalytical approach alone cannot help to unravel or explain the complexities of African American experience in Morrison's fiction. Understanding racial alienation and the resulting dismemberment means looking at the ways in which other historical, cultural or sociodiagnostic forces come to affect the subjectivity of African Americans. For example,

a psychoanalytically informed study of Toni Morrison's fiction like Jean Wyatt's "Giving Body to the Word" can be helpful in understanding how characters like Shadrack, Nel, *Beloved* and Sethe can counter their fear of fragmentation that "precedes the cohesion of the mirror stage and motor control (484)." But the mirror does not always lay the foundation of subjectivity by developing the "moi"-I. It does not always offer the necessary illusion or fiction of the unified self to all Morrison's characters, as I will demonstrate in my discussion of Morrison's recent works *A Mercy* and *Home*. In fact, the mirroring gaze of the other renders Morrison's characters like Florens, like the Fanonian subject, ontologically fixed. The violence of the mirror reduces Morrison's characters to a state of "nothingness". For both Morrison and Fanon, the mirror takes a different dimension in the dialectics of subjectivity. Therefore, I will distinguish my study from the Lacanian-influenced model of Jean Wyatt because it overlooks the role that the mirror can play in the process of racial othering.

Of the other publications on the concept of dismemberment in Morrison's fiction, my own project shares similarities with Philip Page's *Dangerous Freedom* and Pamela B. June's *The Fragmented Female Body and Identity*. Both of these studies focus on aspects of fragmentation in Morrison's works. For June, bodily fragmentation is reflected in the narrative fragmentation, which also bears testimony to the historical fragmentation of women. Her work draws inspiration from feminist theorists like Helene Cixous, Rosi Braidotti and Elizabeth Grosz amongst others. Thematically, June reads in the images of wounds, scars and other bodily mutilations signs of women's historical fragmentation. She argues that these wounds strengthen the feminine bonds between women and offers them "potential solutions to historical fragmentation" (June 5). Stylistically, fragmentation is also indicative of "a disjointed style of writing" and "the state of women's bodies, identities, memories, and relationships in a patriarchal era" (June 4). My argument differs from that of June in terms of its emphasis on the thematic aspect of dismemberment. Compared to June's feminist study, Page uses fragmentation as a broad and abstract concept with the help of deconstruction to denote everything is always already fragmented and falling apart. Page finds the principle of fragmentation operating behind each of Morrison's six early novels, which make up the subject of his study. The theme and style of each novel is characterized by fragmentation: all the objects like the watermelon and doll in *The Bluest Eye* are split, reflecting the characters and their split psyches. Families and communities are divided, which in turn comments upon the divided nature of American and African-American cultures

which are “always already fragmented” (Page 36). Thus, Page reads in the principle of fragmentation an allegory of the entire African-American consciousness which is “always at least double” (Page 36). He reduces the logic of fragmentation to a simplistic notion of binary oppositions and there seems to be no a priori cause behind this. For me, dismemberment is a historically determined phenomenon which has psychic and social consequences for the next generations of African-Americans who still suffer from the effects of slavery, as my following chapters will demonstrate.

Chapter One discusses *A Mercy* focusing on the aspect of historical dismemberment in the context of Africans arriving in the New World circa 1619. Although *A Mercy* was published in 2008, before the publication of Morrison’s most recent novel *Home* in 2012, “the chronology of Morrison’s novel has moved backward” (Peach 241). This endows *A Mercy* the status of an ur-text in the genre of slave narratives and Morrison’s entire oeuvre. According to Linden Peach, the novel “encourages the reader to reflect upon what was to come in time” (Peach 241). It “pick(s) up a point suggested but not fully developed in *Beloved*” (Peach 241). As a prelude to *Beloved*, *A Mercy* suggests “what happened in early modern America led to the plantation system of *Beloved* and the mythologization of the South” (Peach 241). However, it is important to give prior consideration to *A Mercy* because the novel not only carves out the trajectory of Morrison’s oeuvre (and that of my project), it foreshadows what happens in *Beloved* and also other novels, prominently *Song of Solomon*, *Jazz* and *Paradise*. I use the term “dismemberment” in order to emphasize the violence that entailed the forcible separation of Africans from their mother(land) and the concomitant destruction of familial ties, especially the bond between mothers and their children as they were torn apart from each other. I discuss the role that Christianity and other proslavery ideologies played in establishing a hierarchical/patriarchal society which ultimately leads to the institutionalization of slavery as a race-based system. I also chalk out the originary moments when Africans were not only separated from their families but also how, in the context of historical moments in the novel, skin colour is linked to racism and becomes a signifier of slavery. The motif of shoes in the text is at the heart of debates on slavery. Morrison uses shoes as a symbol of slavery, dispossession, and race. They are evocative of the originary loss of mother(land). In the context of the story, they serve as metonyms of the hardship endured by the female character(s) like Florens, in terms of separation and the wilderness experience in the New World. Shoes disconnect Africans not only from their biological mother but from the Ur-

Minha Mãe-Ur-Africa as well. To deprive the foot of physical contact with the soil is to disrupt a nurturing relationship with the earth. Shoes embody this originary dismemberment that severed the relationship between a mother and her children and handed them over to the cruel fate of suffering, bondage and servitude—a fate likened to a living death. Florens’ obsession with shoes carries a whole repertoire of meanings associated with the experience of slavery in the New World. Shoes are symbolic of the Middle Passage for Africans—an experience of originary exile, dismemberment, loss and separation. Thematically, Florens’ final renunciation of shoes embodies the telos of a journey from slavery to freedom in the context of the story.

Chapter Two on *Jazz* discusses how most of the characters like Joe and Violet Trace continue to be haunted by the specters of institutionalized slavery as their ancestors were in the American South. The specters of slavery not only disrupt family relations, between children and their parents, but also have the power to affect future generations’ efforts to establish relationships between themselves as I shall demonstrate in the case of Joe, Violet Trace and Golden Gray. In order to do this, I focus on the impact of transgenerationally transmitted trauma. I argue that the experiences of dismemberment, like feelings of amputation and phantom limbs, arise not from physical amputation but from traumatic experiences/memories of family secrets and the unconscious of someone else as the result of transgenerational hauntings. It is the phantoms of the past which question the subjectivity/integrity of characters like Golden Gray, Violet and Joe Trace. I borrow from the psychoanalytic insights of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok on the phantom and transgenerational haunting in my explanation of phantom limbs in *Jazz*. Although critics like Peter Nicholls—the author of an influential essay on *Beloved* entitled “The Belated Postmodern”—have looked at Morrison’s fiction with the help of concepts like introjections and incorporation as propounded by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok in their book *The Shell and the Kernel*, no one, to my knowledge, has explored the theme of phantom limbs and amputation as suffered by characters like Golden Gray with the help of phantom theory or transgenerational haunting which offers the reader another framework for looking at Morrison’s fiction. The uncanny experience of phantom limbs in *Jazz* is about the unspeakable secrets of ancestors which have a disruptive influence upon the psychic lives of future generations. Characters like Joe Trace and Golden Gray are victims of the violent transgenerational memories they receive through their parents’ stories, and whose traces remain unintegrated. I especially focus on the quest of Golden Gray, who wants to affirm his patrimony. Gray is

haunted by phantom limbs which are the result of his parents' secret involving the circumstances of his birth and the true identity of his father, a black slave, which is kept hidden from him. I contend that *Jazz* is about the saga of transgenerational haunting and its iterability in subsequent generations, which can manifest itself in terms of phantom limbs. To support this argument, I borrow from Morrison's interview with Michael Silverblatt in which she describes how, as a writer, she is interested in the connections that exists "across generational lines" (Interview 217). Morrison reaffirms these transgenerational links in another interview with Sheldon Hackney: "Children can actually represent ancestors or grandmothers or grandfathers" ("I Come from People" 130). Morrison's remarks endorse the concept of transgenerational hauntings as propounded by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok. To sum up the traumatic impact of transgenerational hauntings and the consequent experiences of dismemberment like phantom limbs and amputation lead to a discussion of the importance of healing touch with the help of Luce Irigaray's concept of touch which can mend the bodies of characters by bringing them closer and putting them back together.

In Chapter Three, I look at cultural dismemberment in *Sula* with the help of the Girardian hypothesis of the scapegoat. According to Michael Kirwan, Girard does not present the practice of scapegoating as a conscious ritual. The Girardian hypothesis focuses on scapegoating as a "spontaneous and unconscious psychological mechanism, by which someone is falsely accused and victimized" (Kirwan 49). Kirwan further adds that a scapegoat like Oedipus and in the present case, Sula, is singled out because he or she is "especially vulnerable or marginal to begin with" (Kirwan 49). Cultural dismemberment implies the violence attached to the ritual violent expulsion of scapegoat figures like Sula and other marginal characters like Pilate—who are considered "peripherals" and "outlaws" (by their community) and live on the margins of society. Such Morrison characters are designated "outsiders" and find themselves pitted against their society. Marc C. Conner is one of the critics studying Morrison's "engagement with the relations between the individual and the community" ("From the Sublime" 49). Conner observes that the relationship between individuals and the community are depicted as "predatory, vampirical, sterile, cowardly, threatening; and the individual must struggle desperately to survive in the midst of this damaging community" ("From the Sublime" 49). This struggle to survive ends in the fragmentation and destruction of these characters ("From the Sublime" 49). The community ruthlessly victimizes the individual and ultimately destroys them like Pecola and Sula ("From the Sublime" 50). I contend

that the community victimizes characters like Sula as a result of internalized racism, social inequities and inherent prejudices. The community internalizes racism and refers it to members of their own community. The community subjects Sula, in particular, to scapegoating because of her black womanhood/femaleness, sexuality and her disregard for the societal strictures, and her ancestors. The community victimizes Sula by symbolically cutting her off from the rest of the community. The community members make accusations and invent rituals to ward off Sula's evil influence. They also add to her dismemberment by denying her any means of nurturance. Unlike the comments made by Morrison in her interview(s) on the nurturing role of community in *Sula*, it is the community that seems to be nurtured by Sula. The impact of Sula's scapegoating is also heightened through Morrison's characterization of Sula and how, as an author, she endorses Sula's treatment at the hands of the community. This makes me look at the tension that exists not only between the individual and the community, but also between the author Morrison "to whom the production of a text, a book, or a work can be legitimately attributed," (qtd. in Burke 90) and as a commenter of prominence and interpreter of her own work. This authorial voice/interpretation can overdetermine the reader's reception of her text by creating an extratextual discourse on her fiction not necessarily in accordance with the narratorial intention of her novel, as is the case with the third person narrative account in *Sula*. This tension arises especially when the reader forfeits the freedom of his/her own critical faculties to engage in a dialogic relationship, but instead depends heavily upon the author's interpretative insights: "But such freedom is also fraught with dangers, the dangers that the author will provide too little direction, too much direction, or enigmatically contradictory directions, and dangers that readers will resist or abandon the active role that the texts demand" (Page 27).

The purpose of the final Chapter Four is to expand the scope of my study beyond the multiple forms of dismemberment: historical, cultural and transgenerational. The concept of home encompasses Morrison's fictional and nonfictional world. It also shows her global concerns and politics. Her fiction demonstrates how the quest for home offers an antidote and refuge from the trauma of racism (Schreiber 9). Home is not merely a physical location in Morrison's fiction. It appears as a complex concept with multivalent meanings attached to it. It bears emotional, psychological and social connotations. It offers the characters a place of freedom where they can live their lives and create a psychic space that allows the characters to survive and relive trauma (Schreiber 11). In her interview with Ann Hostetler, Morrison describes America as "a nation of

immigrants" ("The Art" 202). According to her, "one of the greatest needs of immigrants is to feel at home" ("The Art" 202). From *A Mercy to Home*, the concept of home embodies the African American state of exile, their search for a place of freedom and social equality. In *Home*, Morrison continues with her project of imagining a space of domestic and social comfort which is physically and psychically safe and in the broad sense, a homeland for African Americans. Home offers a place of refuge from the social, historical and psychic dismemberment or traumas of racism which result in experiences of fragmentation, amputation and dismemberment. Finally, the theme of burial in *Home* is also important as it connects Morrison's latest novel with the larger writing project she envisions as "literary archaeology." In her essay, "The Site of Memory," she describes the trajectory of her project in terms of a "journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply" (71). Morrison's act of writing is a memorial in honor of all those African Americans who made heart-rending sacrifices at the cost of the precious lives they lost. Her writing performs the role of a burial rite—exorcising the dead by bringing them into the discourse. She honors the dead by constructing a *tombeau* for them and by way of performing, as it were, the funeral rites. Morrison's characters re-member their past and their ancestors in order to bury it. Remember carries a double sense here. To remember is not only to recall from oblivion the lives of those African Americans who lost their lives or whose stories of sacrifice are lost or forgotten because they are the disremembered and unaccounted for, in the words of Morrison, but also because "they are dismembered, cut up and off, and not re-membered" (Horvitz 166). In an interview with Gloria Naylor, Morrison describes her desire to invoke those dis(re)membered people who were "unburied, or at least unceremoniously buried," and that her desire is to bury them "properly" and "artistically" (Interview 209). Frank's performance of burial rites on behalf of a stranger marks not only his return home, but also marks the writer's "journey to a site" in order to perform "the proper burial to ensure the departed person's journey home" (Rushdy *Remembering* 75).

There are various ways and strategies for looking at dismemberment in Morrison's fiction. I have tried to adopt a multifaceted approach to dismemberment to help the reader understand the complexities of racial alienation in Morrison's works. I have adopted a Fanonian approach to demonstrate the impact of racism on the psyche of African-Americans and the concomitant experiences of dismemberment. My project argues for the importance of combining historical, psychological as well as sociocultural analysis of Morrison's fiction in order to understand the overall impact of

racism and its debilitating effects on the psyches of her characters. By situating Morrison's fiction within a variety of discourses, I hope to offer a multifaceted and a highly interdisciplinary framework for a more rewarding analysis of her fiction.

CHAPTER ONE

HISTORICAL DISMEMBERMENT IN *A MERCY*

(N)arrative remains the best way to learn anything, whether history or theology.... (Toni Morrison)

We must read Morrison through the lens of the plantation reasoning precisely in order to preserve and unpack (...) ambivalence. (Valérie Loichot 164)

“In all the books that you have studied you never have studied Negro history have you?” an ex-slave asked an interviewer from Fisk University. “If you want Negro history,” he insisted, “you will have to get (it) from somebody who wore the shoe, and by and by from one to the other you will get a book.” (Fisk University, Unwritten History, 45-46)

Race and Religion in the Historical Context of *A Mercy*

A Mercy is set in the late seventeenth century. The novel predates the era of institutionalized slavery in Virginia and its development as a race-based system. This was a time of radical transition before racial differences and stereotypes took solid roots and slavery got established as the “bedrock of economy and of the social order” (Kolchin 29). Soon the society was to create differences between blacks and whites along racial, class and religious hierarchies (Kolchin 61). In her interview with Brophy-Warren, Morrison describes how she was looking for a period in the history of the American South which offered a context in order to examine “a period before racism was inextricably related to slavery. The only place was this period before a race hierarchy was established legally and later culturally in the states. That was when people were more preoccupied with religious differences” (“A Writer’s Vote”). In her National Public Radio interview with Lynn Neary, Morrison talks about the historical background which gives her an opportunity to “separate race from slavery; to see what it’s like, what it might have been like, to be a slave but without being raced; where your status was being enslaved but there was no application of racial inferiority” (“Toni Morrison Discusses”). According to Pelagia Goulimari, the author’s statement about separating race from slavery is

highly debatable: “If Morrison wishes to make the unqualified claim that early American history provides the first coupling of racism and slavery, this seems a highly controversial claim” (Goulimari 249). She then refers to Aristotle’s *Poetics* “to find the explicit justification of slavery in terms of racial inferiority: non-Hellenes and “Asiatics” are “by nature slaves” (Goulimari 249). Other than the Aristotelian idea of natural slavery, the apologists for slavery in the American South relied upon other arguments for support as well. Morrison herself broaches some of the proslavery arguments in her essay “The Site of Memory” which rely upon Enlightenment Philosophy and the Bible for their support. In general, Enlightenment Philosophy “relied upon the premise that Africans were godless savages, living in a brutal Hobbesian state” (Jackson M 74). There is a whole range of similar proslavery arguments in the novel, making it less important to argue whether slavery preceded racism or vice versa than “to acknowledge that the entrenchment of racialised slavery, the development of Enlightenment science, and the rise of natural rights philosophy engendered significant developments in the ideological, legal, and everyday practices of race” (Spear 581). Besides enabling Morrison to trace the genealogy of race-based slavery in the New World, the historical setting of the novel offers her the opportunity to investigate how Africans survived the Middle Passage. The forcible transportation of Africans was responsible for creating a radical separation from Mother Africa. It disrupted familial relationships between mothers and daughters, as seen in case of Florens and her mother called *a minha mãe*, which is a Portuguese expression for *my mother*. Because the enslavement of Africans involved the forcible uprooting and separation of people, which was traumatic and violent in nature, I refer to this uprooting as an act of historical dismemberment. The act of historical dismemberment obliterated all fragmentary traces of African and even Native American cultures. In the consequences of slavery and the break with cultures, Morrison demonstrates the need various groups of people like Africans, Native Americans and the indentured Europeans had to develop survival strategies. She also explores the possibilities of a self-presence constituting black subjectivity prior to its historical dismemberment after its encounter with the objectifying racial gaze of the New World. I will investigate this moment of originary dismemberment in Florens’ initial encounter with the Puritans with some help from Fanon and link it with her mother’s moment of being raced in Barbados. This is one of the defining moments in the novel as Florens becomes conscious of the coded language of colour. The objectifying gaze of the Puritans shatters her sense of “blackness”. Like Fanon, she discovers not only the oppressive weight of her blackness but

also the burden of her ethnic characteristics. The traumatic impact of this encounter will expose her to the experience of dismemberment and alienation from others.

There were also plenty of other theological, political, historical, intellectual and cultural forces working together behind the crystallization of racial ideas which supplanted other differences of religion, class, and colour. In her NPR interview with Lynn Neary, Morrison points to Bacon's Rebellion as one of the moments behind the crystallization of these forces. Building upon Morrison's insight, Goulimari brings in Jacob Vaark's observations on Bacon's Rebellion and the enforcement of the new laws and slave codes which "separated and protected all whites from all others forever," (8) as an inaugural moment "in the creation—the institutional construction—of racism" (Goulimari 127). She also refers to Florens' experience of "race-ing" when she seeks shelter overnight at Widow Ealing's hut. There, she finds herself facing a witchcraft trial which Morrison situates in the text just two years before the actual historical events of the Salem witch trials were began in 1692 (Goulimari 137). We can also add to Florens' moments of race-ing her mother's race-ing in Africa through the latter's experience of the African diaspora or the Middle Passage, to her enslavement in Barbados and D'Ortega's plantation in Maryland as indicative of racism's originary moments in the text, which is haunted by the trauma of slavery. As Melanie R. Anderson observes, "The haunting institution of slavery is always already present in every relationship and business transaction of this novel, even though it is not always visible" (Anderson 134). The reader, through the minute observation of detail, can also observe that the boundaries between indenture servitude and slavery are "slippery" (Anderson 131, 135). The status of indentured slaves like Willard and Scully is like that of permanent slaves as their terms of indenture, as those of the other indentured slaves, will never end. They have no realistic or foreseeable hope of freedom. Their plight is interchangeable with that of the earliest Africans who were "subsumed into the indenture system" (Hendrick 17).¹ According to Eugene D. Genovese, "We cannot be sure that the position of the earliest Africans differed markedly from that of the white indentured servants" (*Roll, Jordan, Roll* 31). In fact, it was the indenture system that degenerated and led to the development of racial and slave codes in Virginia (Hendrick 17). The text portrays this period of transition in history when servants, like Willard and Scully who were on indentured servant contracts, mysteriously became lifetime slaves. The fate of other indentured servants Florens finds aboard the wagon as she travels west to

fetch the blacksmith—who can cure her Mistress Rebekka of the pox—is even worse than those of Willard and Scully: “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” (38). In the tannery, “only fast death in acid” awaits them (38). All the aforementioned proslavery forces play in the background as Morrison tries to investigate the race-based development of slavery—a relatively modern phenomenon—which “had to be constructed, planted, institutionalized and legalized” (“Toni Morrison Discusses”). Now I shall try to investigate the role that Christian theology played in promoting the proslavery arguments.

Christianity played a major role in endorsing the race concept for the apologists for slavery in the American South who cited biblical stories in order to justify slavery with a suggestion of divine approval. Morrison considers Christianity and apologists for slavery who exploited such biblical accounts as the curse of Ham, complicit in promoting the race-based concept of slavery. In her novel, she indicts Christianity for the role it played in developing rationales for proslavery arguments. As an institutionalized religion, she aligns it with exclusion, conservatism, patriarchy, colonization and the perpetual enslavement of Africans. According to Gene Andrew Jarrett, “Racial hierarchy and paternalism descended especially from Christianity to organize social relations between masters and slaves and to implant the ethos of industry and obligation in slave communities” (*Representing the Race* 38). Religion and patriarchy/paternalism were two of the foundation structures of exclusion in Virginia and they played a pivotal role in the perpetuation of slavery during the formative years of slavery, as we shall see. Peter Kolchin, author of the seminal book *American Slavery: 1619-1877*, observes that “religious idioms pervaded the proslavery literature” which “played a key role in the defence of slavery” (Kolchin 196). This argument is further supported by historians like Drew Gilpin Faust, who suggests that “the Bible served as the core” for the “proslavery mainstream” (qtd. in Kolchin 196). Southerners were steeped in the Bible and were predisposed to look to biblical precedent(s) to justify slavery (Kolchin 196). Christian theology helped to create a very dogmatic and racially enclosed society. Its hierarchical and exclusive structure was one aspect it shared with the patriarchal structure of society in Virginia. Religion and patriarchy/slavery were both based on the idea of Providence, which was instrumental in keeping intact the hierarchical relationships between—subject and object, master and slave, man and woman.

Just as the business of slavery and tobacco is interlinked in *A Mercy*, Catholicism had its own role to play in promoting what the text refers to as the marriage between slavery and tobacco (12). Religious communities were complicit in justifying the dogma of slavery based on the model of Aristotelian philosophy which basically asserted the right of one race over another. As Valerie Smith points out, “Indeed, throughout the novel, religious communities prove to be sites of cruelty that perpetuate dominance and racist ideology” (V. Smith 121). The proponents of slavery fell back on historical and biblical excuses in order to justify slavery. They exploited the biblical accounts of Abraham and the curse of Ham, the docility and inferiority of Africans, Greek philosophical assertions, and examples of the colonial Roman law of enslavement and other forms of arguments. Tessa Roynon quotes the last address by Florens’ mother in which she explains why she begged Vaark to take her daughter as “Morrison’s first depiction of action on the African continent and for its challenge to the oversimplified polarization between black victimhood and white oppression or to a straight equation between race and slavery” (Roynon 86). She quotes from the text the mother’s own moment of being raced and enslaved in Barbados: “The men guarding we and selling we are black” (162). Both Roynon and Goulimari describe the moment of this enslavement in terms of its universality and its relation to “universalized blackness” which reduces the subjectivity of (black) women to that of objects and other countable things (Roynon 87; Goulimari 140-1). It is the case that within the historical reality of the novel, skin colour comes to justify slavery. It is also a historical reality that Africans themselves were accomplices in slavery as they collaborated with Europeans in buying and selling human property (Kolchin 19). But it will be erroneous to assume a single-faceted view like that of Maria Rice Bellamy, who writes that *A Mercy* “explores the involvement of Africans in the process of enslaving other Africans” (Bellamy 15). The textual and historical evidence does not allow for one-sided opinions—assuming a one-sided view lends legitimacy to advocates of the plantation and slavery like Peter Downes, whom Vaark comes across along the course of his journey. Downes sells the argument of Africans-selling-Africans under the garb of a disguised apology in order to convince Vaark: “Africans are interested in selling slaves...as an English planter is in buying them” (28-9).² The advocates of slavery like Peter Downes wanted to justify the brutal treatment of slaves by selling the argument that Africans were themselves active in practicing slavery extensively in their own societies whereby implying that Europeans were not entirely responsible for the slave trade. As Édouard Glissant observes in his influential essay on the Plantation system “Closed

Place, Open Word,” “The colonists and the Planters, as well as the travelers who visited them, were possessed of a real need to justify the system” (*Poetics* 70). In *A Mercy*, the narrator, like a historian, exposes the impulse to justify a one-sided account of history like the one presented by Peter Downes to Vaark, pointing out that Africans were willing partners in selling their own brothers into the business of slavery (Kolchin 19). According to Maurice Jackson, the logic of indigenous slavery helped undermine the moral arguments against New World slavery, hence implying that European slave traders were not entirely responsible for “introducing the slave trade to Africa but merely expand(ed) existing traffic into broader markets” (Jackson M 81).

These are some of the historical-religious conditions of early slavery in the American South. The period offers Morrison an archaeological site whereby she can analyze the coupling of racism and slavery. It also offers her room to pose other questions concerning, for instance, baptism and literacy, not simply in terms of the redemption of souls and the manumission of slaves but in terms of existential imperatives, release from enslavement and in terms of keeping the hierarchies intact. Religion and knowledge were used (by the plantation owners) as tools to legitimize the hierarchies and to exercise complete control over their slaves. Both helped them develop a theology of slavery. The question of Christian baptism implied manumission and both baptism and manumission meant freedom for the slaves. Baptism thus threatened the very institution of slavery. This was the reason why the slave-owners opposed slave conversion (Pitts 39). Vaark’s observation of Bacon’s Rebellion mentions eliminating manumission as the turning point which institutionalizing white privilege by granting “license” to the ruling elites to undermine black autonomy “by eliminating manumission...for black people only; by granting license to any white to kill any black for any reason...” (8).

The novel involves many journeys undertaken by the characters, but mainly revolves around two: one undertaken by Jacob Vaark and the second by the young girl, Florens, whom he accepts as slave from his debtor, D’Ortega, as partial payment of his debt. Vaark’s acceptance of Florens is the act of mercy the title of the novel refers to from the perspective of Florens’ mother (Roynon 80). Since Vaark makes the first journey which Marc Conner describes as “the beginning of the novel’s central story,” (“What Lay Beneath” 151) I shall begin my discussion of the text focusing on his journey first. Jacob Vaark is a patriarchal figure like his biblical namesake. He is *en route* to the Jublio plantation to collect

his debt from a Portuguese Roman Catholic planter and slave-owner named D'Ortega, in Maryland. For Marc C. Conner, D'Ortega's plantation represents "the harsh brutalities of a Southern slave system" (Conner 152) and his/its inhuman treatment of slaves, especially that of the female domestic slaves which is ironically prefigured in Jacob's confrontation with the maltreatment of domestic and other animals like the horse and raccoon. On his journey, Jacob has to dismount from his horse twice, "the second time to free the bloody hind leg of a young raccoon stuck in a tree break. Regina munched trail-side grass while he tried to be as gentle as possible, avoiding the claws and teeth of the frightened animal. Once he succeeded, the raccoon limped off, perhaps to the mother forced to abandon it or more likely into other claws" (9). Vaark's act of kindness and compassion for animals like the raccoon and his horse reveals the soft side of his personality. His respectful behavior towards the animal(s) "affirms his sensitivity or fellow feeling for another creature" (Christiansë 219). This stands out in ironic contrast to the treatment he metes out to the women in his household who live a quasi-slave-like life under his facile patronage and protection. The graphic image of the frightened young animal suffering from forced abandonment by its mother lingers on in the text and the mind of the reader. It alludes not only to a Tennysonian depiction of nature, red in tooth and claw, but the incident also, in fact, offers a proleptic reference to the story of the young girl, Florens, who associates herself with the plight of animals and is forcibly abandoned by her mother. In fact, the vulnerable condition of women under patriarchy or the paternalism of slavery, in general, is contrasted with that of animals. At the reception hosted by D'Ortega, Vaark rightly observes the status of domestic slaves, especially "the clove-smelling" woman who serves the food, is that of a sexual object. It is only during the course of negotiations that take place between D'Ortega and Vaark that we come to know the extent to which D'Ortega subjects his slaves to torture, violence and sexual abuse (20-22). According to Susan Neal Mayberry, there are suggestions in the text that D'Ortega "engage(s) in pedophilia" with the help of his wife" ("Visions and Revisions" 175). The extent of his sexual abuse will be out by the end of the novel when Florens' mother bears testimony to D'Ortega's sexual exploitation of his slaves as he orders unidentified men to "break" her in along with other slave women in order to increase his livestock (161).

D'Ortega is unable to pay his debt because he not only lost his human "cargo" but had to pay a fine and spend more money as he is "forced to scoop up the corpses...and ordered to burn or bury them" (14). But he

ends up “cart(ing) them out to low land where saltweed and alligators would finish the work” (14). Now the only way he can pay some of his debt is in human flesh—a commodity which Vaark detests. He asks Vaark to take one of his slaves instead as a partial payment of his debt. Vaark initially resists D’Ortega’s offer of slave(s) but is half coerced and half tempted to yield to the temptation as he cannot see “any other form of remuneration” coming from D’Ortega (V. Smith 122). He also realizes the futility of fighting a lawsuit against D’Ortega because of his lowly class position (21). He asks for “the clove-laced” woman “On a whim, mostly to silence him and fairly sure D’Ortega would refuse” because she serves more purpose than cooking by producing more children who would be slaves as she would pass on her own status to them (22).³ Like Sethe, who murders her daughter out of desire to put her somewhere safe lest she inherits the slave status, the clove-scented woman—described as “a minha mãe”—desires the safety of her children, especially her young daughter Florens whose budding sexuality will render her a sexual object just like herself (160). She does not want her daughter to be the object of sexual exploitation as she was “by the paternalism of slavery” (Christiansē 193). Out of a desire to protect her daughter and keep her somewhere safe, she bends on her knees and begs Vaark to take Florens instead. Afraid of passing her own status on to her daughter and convinced of the humanity in Vaark (who in the eyes of the mother, at least will not prey upon her daughter sexually), she can sense that he sees in her daughter “a human child, not pieces of eight. (She) knelt before him, hoping for a miracle” (164). Being an orphan himself, Vaark can empathize with “waifs and whelps” and their need for shelter (30). Reminded of his own deprived childhood, he is moved by self-pity to accept the young girl. But his motive to take the girl is not as altruistic as it seems. He deliberates upon his decision “thinking also” about his wife who would “welcome” the child as a relief from the painful memories of having lost her own daughter—the same age as Florens (25, 30, 95).

According to Susan Neal Mayberry, “Naïve or not,” Vaark’s decision to take the girl “endorses slavery” (“Visions and Revisions” 172). For all his moral abhorrence, Vaark’s fateful meeting with D’Ortega proves to be “the catalyst for his participation in the slave trade” (Wardi 24). By the time he leaves D’Ortega’s mansion, he has undergone what Anderson describes as “a crisis of conscience” (Anderson 133). He has seen and internalized D’Ortega’s world of the plantation, with all its excess and pomp into his own dream world. He wants to build another house similar to D’Ortega’s with the money he will reap by investing in “rum” and sugar production in