

## **Women, Work and Bondage in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy***

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### **Abstract**

In her novel *A Mercy*, set in the 17<sup>th</sup> century American wilderness, Toni Morrison again explores the interaction between woman and nature, and the juxtaposition of wilderness and civilization. As in her earlier novel *Beloved*, Morrison's female characters travel the pathways of the natural world and are transformed. Against its backdrop of early material culture among immigrants in the Americas, *A Mercy* can be said to predictably bring the snake of capitalism into the new Eden. However, there is much more at work in Morrison's wilderness. As Morrison develops characters who live in varying degrees of chattel servitude, she explores the evolution of American slavery through the creation of the slave holder. Just as the institution of slavery is an unnatural affront to nature, so the evolution of man to slave holding persona becomes an act of anti-creation.

### **Introduction: The Early American Landscape**

*A Mercy*, set in pre-revolutionary North America explores the possibilities that early settlers would have found upon their arrival in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. In a place that Morrison has called "ad hoc," a place where the ruling class often changed, but where there was always a ruling class, non-democratic systems were constructed specifically to manage large tracts of land and to exploit natural resources. The novel does not speculate on whether any of the main characters are looking to the future for any system better than the one they have. As readers, we see only the vicissitudes of everyday life, and the precariousness of life on the frontier. But in examining land, work, and property among the different classes of immigrants, *A Mercy* addresses the question of servitude and slavery as it evolves from custom and tradition to the law of the new land.

It is in her work *Playing in the Dark*, where Toni Morrison first outlines her fascination with the early American landscape as a complex setting that is both difficult to recreate in the mind and irresistible in its attraction for different immigrant groups:

The flight from the Old World to the New is generally seen to be a flight from oppression and limitation to freedom and possibility. Although, in fact, the escape was sometimes an escape from license—from a society perceived to be unacceptably permissive, ungodly, and undisciplined...All the Old World offered these immigrants was poverty, prison, social ostracism, and not infrequently, death. (Morrison 1993, 34)

But Morrison has added a new element to the immigrant experience in *A Mercy* by exploring the lives of indentured servants who worked alongside African and Native American slaves. Inspired by Don Jordan and Michael Walsh's *White Cargo: The Forgotten history of Britain's White Slaves in America*, Morrison enters the minds of several different *involuntary* immigrants, while she acknowledges that the experience of voluntary immigrants of this time period was

often driven by the need to escape the old rather than pursue the as yet unimagined dream of America. Coupled with this need for escape was often the desire to recreate the self using the most familiar images available, images of manhood and womanhood learned in the Old World:

Whatever the reasons, the attraction was of the “clean slate” variety, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity not only to be born again but to be born again in new clothes, as it were...In the New World there was the vision of a limitless future, made more gleaming by the constraint, dissatisfaction and turmoil left behind. (Morrison 1993, 34)

### **The Refugee Becomes Landowner: Jacob Vaark**

Morrison chooses the sputtering patroonship system as the setting for Jacob Vaark’s new beginning in the new world. Indeed, New Netherlands had been won and lost by the British during the 1660’s and 1670’s before finally being returned to British rule. Jacob’s speculation about the future of his patroonship was well founded:

He knew the landscape intimately from years ago when it was still the old Swedish Nation and, later, when he was an agent for the Company. Still later when the Dutch took control. During and after that contest, there had never been much point in knowing who claimed this or that terrain; this or another outpost. Other than certain natives, to whom it all belonged, from one year to another any stretch might be claimed by a church, controlled by a Company or become the private property of a royal’s gift to a son or a favorite. Since land claims were always fluid, except for notations on bills of sale, he paid scant attention to old or new names of towns or forts...(Morrison 2008, 12-13)

Jacob Vaark takes his first tentative steps into the ruling class when he suddenly and unexpectedly acquires land. Indeed, such a change in fortunes for a poor man is much more likely in the new world than in Europe. Vaark’s unique experience in this particular place (“Fort Orange; Cape Henry; Nieuw Amsterdam; Wiltwyck...Sesquahanna via Chesapeake on through Lenape...”) allows him to understand that “land claims were always fluid...” (Morrison 2008, 13) He remembers the “people’s war (Morrison 2008, 10) as he rides the old Lenape trail six years following King Phillip’s war in New England. The patroonship he has inherited from his uncle has shaped his destiny, but he also knows that to know a place by many names—“The Company,” the old Swedish Nation, etc.—is to be forewarned to expect change.

Not only were the patroonships subject to the tides of war, they were dependent upon a sufficient number of immigrant families to work the land. Patroonship created a system where the divide between the various groups of immigrants in the new world was generally the same as it had been in the old world: wealthy land owners and poor serfs. Many immigrants of the 17<sup>th</sup> century were landed investors representing some “company” or other with hopes of a large return on

investment. These landed immigrants were seeking spectacular riches of the voyage-of-conquest variety. These ventures did not generally prosper. (Friedenberg 1992, 32)

At least one of the large patroonships continued to enjoy “such privileges and immunities as they formerly enjoyed” (Rensselaer 1888, 20) during the late 1670’s. These “privileges” amounted to a continuation of the system of manor serfdom imported from Europe. Indeed, the patroonship system continued in various degrees of its original outline until the 1800’s.

In the character of Jacob Vaark, Morrison introduces a man who benefits directly from the patroon system—he has “inherited” a patroonship, placing him firmly in the master class—and he is forced to confront the temptations that occur:

An uncle he had never met from the side of his family that had abandoned him died and left him one hundred and twenty acres of a dormant patroonship in a climate he much preferred . . . (Morrison 2008, 11-12)

Jacob is himself a refugee—“a ratty orphan become landowner” (Morrison 2008, 12) who finds his own personal “clean slate” through luck and hard work in North America. His circumstances had been such that he could easily have become an indentured servant himself, but he was simply lucky. Jacob manages not only to shake off his impoverished origins, but also to embrace the life of the planter class. He is seduced by the abundance of land and opportunities for trade. He profits from the forced labor of others—from his indentured servants, from his slaves, and even from his wife who is bound to him by the price of her passage.

Jacob’s laborers, including his wife Rebekka, represent not only the class divide created under the patroonship system, but also the ease with which serfs became slaves in the New World. What Morrison shows the reader in the depiction of these various labor classes is the beginning of North American Slavery:

I wanted to separate race from slavery, to see what it was like...What it might have been like to be a slave but without being “raced.” Because I couldn’t believe that that was the natural state of people who were...born, and people who came here. That it had to be constructed, planted, institutionalized, and legalized. So I moved as far back as I was able, when what we now call America was fluid, ad hoc. A place where countries from all over the world were grabbing at land and resources and all sorts of people were coming here. (Neary 2008)

### **Choices**

Many of the immigrants in *A Mercy* (those who are not captives) appear to be refugees. In his book *New Worlds for All: Indians, Europeans and the Remaking of Early America*, Colin Calloway explores the way some European refugee/settlers sought in the new world a life like the life the one they left behind in the old world:

Such people did not leave “Europe”—the term had little meaning and less emotive appeal to most of them. They left a little and local world of regions, distinct dialects, familiar places, and human communities. Life would never be the same for them. (Calloway 1997, 7)

But Calloway also points out that at this early point in colonization, there was no “America” to seek, and no “American-ness” to achieve. What we think of as the American Dream did not really exist then. There was, however an abundance of land, and the opportunity for some to achieve control over some portion of that land.

America was more than just a place; it was a second opportunity for humanity—a chance, after the bloodlettings and the pogroms, the plagues and the famines, the political and religious wars, the social and economic upheavals, for Europeans to get it right this time. In the beginning, the American dream was a European dream, and it exerted emotional and motivational power for generations. (Calloway 1997, 10)

It was to be expected that the immigrant population would achieve some interaction and even some degree of assimilation with the native population. Calloway cites several scholars who claim that early American colonists participated in so many cultural exchanges with Native peoples that they became like them in habits and appearance. This was often because of the need to adopt survival strategies, and to adapt to the environment. But this was not the original goal:

Europeans did not come to America to become Indians or even, in the early days, to become “Americans.” They came, for the most part, to recreate in the new World the kind of communities they had left in the Old, with some improvements. (Calloway 1997, 4)

These immigrants did not come to invent race-based slavery, and they did not come to invent North American plantation system. They did, however, set in motion systems that they were familiar with, and those systems would need race-based slavery to survive.

### **The Profit Motive**

The lure of abundant and “available” land would have been hard to resist for colonists who had little or nothing to leave behind, but the motivations operating in the 17<sup>th</sup> century world of Jacob Vaark are more complex. This is after all the aftermath of the voyages of conquest, and the conquest agenda has magically morphed into an agenda of colonization. The colonial mission seemed to most who engaged in it to be a benign, if not positive endeavor, in which colonialists were taught to believe that the seizure of wealth and land was justified by the gift of religion and civilization. Land grabbing was part of the religious mission:

Many explorers were honest men in their own eyes: but the American Indians were not Christians; they practiced “abominations” (which in specific areas, such as Mexico, was certainly true) and they were seen as outside the pale of known civilization. Discovering a new land occupied by a heathen people meant valid seizure to Europeans, as did Christian duty enjoin saving their souls. . . . (Friedenberg 1992, 22)

Such motives reflect the need for security and comfort—the paradise of legend sought by the conquistadors of the previous generation. In her interview with James Marcus, Morrison discusses the idea of establishing any kind of paradise:

I was interested in the kind of violent conflict that could happen as a result of efforts to establish a Paradise. Our view of Paradise is so limited: It requires you to think of yourself as the *chosen* people – chosen by God . . . it’s really defined by who is *not* there as well as who is. (Marcus 1998)

Of course it is not enough to have land if one has no means to profit from it. Even though a farm may yield a cash crop, a process usually overseen by men and employing both male and female workers, it must also produce or manufacture the necessities of living, a process largely in the hands of women. Thus we see Rebekka, along with Lina, Sorrow, and Florens raising livestock, preserving food, planting and gathering, sewing and mending, and in general, performing all of the farm tasks that the two male servants do not do. The farm must produce all of the products that Jacob does not obtain through trade. The women supply just enough labor to maintain this cycle of supply and demand, and when the family network on the Vaark farm is disrupted by disease and death, the physical environment suffers and the economic system cannot survive.

### **The Creation of the Slaveholder**

Jacob Vaark is a dynamic character who is visibly influenced by the societal and environmental forces around him. He does not think of himself as a slaveholder even after he has acquired two female servants who are in bondage to him. To hold servants in term bondage as with the two men Willard and Scully was quite common; indeed it would have been uncommon to hire a servant for wages. There was no industry as we understand it today, and no “job creation” to fuel the economy. Many immigrants had only their labor to trade. It was not unusual for free persons who would now be considered citizens, to bond or indenture themselves, even if their legal status allowed them complete freedom of movement:

To the British, among whom many African women would be servants and slaves in the seventeenth century, freedom equated with being British, Christian, and endowed with material resources that could yield an adequate income. That is, one had to have enough resources to avoid having to sell her or his labor for self and family maintenance, as serfs on the manor or apprentices in the crafts

did...The unfree were those who sold their labor and tended not to be landed. (Ashcraft-Eason 1992, 63).

Thus freedom as we understand it in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was something quite different in the colonial mind. There was a perception of freedom among the landed gentry that was associated with religion, class and gender that had very little to do with race or national origin. There was the expectation that there would always be a servant class similar to European serfdom. And there was no tradition in place allowing freedom to women of any class:

Women's freedom was restricted in early America in many ways. Typically, women were subjected to a variety of personal, economic, and legal limitations. As a general rule, without her husband's participation a married woman in early America could not write a will, sue or be sued, spend money she had earned, or sell property she had brought to the marriage. When their husbands died, women still did not gain control over all the property. They ordinarily received a life tenancy, but not full ownership rights . . . (Rosen 1992, 313)

These conditions combined to create Jacob Vaark's mindset as landowner and master: he understood himself to have a legal entitlement to the labor of his servants and his wife. Their labor belonged to him, not to them.

After he acquires Florens, a woman he accepts as payment for a debt, it is not clear whether he sees any difference between term bondage and chattel slavery. Coincident with this event is his decision to actively seek the profits that accrue from sugar trade and the plantation system. Jacob accepts persons as chattel, even as he tells himself that he abhors slavery as an institution and slave holders as individuals. Despite his personal dislike of the slave trader D'Ortega, Jacob is part of a community mindset, "for the society from which Europeans came treated peasants much like slaves." (Friedenberg 1992, 23)

But even more insidious is Rebekka's transformation, which is fueled by fear and bitterness, and the powerlessness of widowhood. Rebekka discovered that she could not survive alone on the frontier without the community. Embracing the community would mean accepting the community's rules:

...three unmastered women and an infant out here, alone, belonging to no one became wild game for anyone. None of them could inherit; none was attached to a church or recorded in its books. (Morrison 2008, 58-59)

Baptists, Presbyterians, tribe, army, family, some encircling outside thing was needed. Pride, she thought. Pride alone made them think that they needed only themselves. . . (Morrison 2008, 58)

While Jacob's transition to slaveholder is a more obvious study in the self delusion of one who has yielded to temptation, Rebekka's transition is more in the vein of what Frederick Douglass calls "the fatal poison of irresponsible power" (Douglass 1993, 57)

My mistress was, as I have said, a kind and tenderhearted woman; and in the simplicity of her soul, she commenced, when I first went to live with her, to treat me as she supposed one human being ought to treat another ...Slavery proved as injurious to her as it did to me. When I went there, she was a pious, warm, and tender-hearted woman. She had bread for the hungry, clothes for the naked, and a comfort for every mourner that came within her reach. Slavery soon proved its ability to divest her of these heavenly qualities. (Douglass 1993, 59-60)

Here Douglas is speaking of one of his owners, Master Hugh's wife, who had in fact helped him learn to read. But she had been told by her husband that this was wrong, that this in fact would yield the slave "unfit" to be a slave, "make him discontented and unhappy," and that he would "become unmanageable." Douglas states that not only did she bend to the pressure of her plantation owner husband to stop teaching him to read, she seemed to acquire a pro-slavery zeal:

She finally became even more violent in her opposition than her husband himself. She was not satisfied with simply doing as well as he had commanded; she seemed anxious to do better. (Douglass 1993, 60)

In Douglass' experience, the 'kind and tenderhearted' wife of a slaveholder is corrupted by the institution, not only by the pressure of her husband, but also by a perceived peer pressure from the society around her. The desire to fit in helped to sustain and promote the institution long enough for it to become an entrenched economic institution.

This reaction is eerily similar to what happens to Rebekka in *A Mercy* when she sees a village woman slap Sorrow in the face. She argues with the woman, and the reader must imagine what transpires between the two white women (Is Rebekka defending Sorrow? Is she angry at the treatment of her "property?") But Rebekka also slaps Sorrow as soon as they are away from the village. Florens believes that Rebekka says "other words to her, softer ones," and Florens believes that "Mistress has a sweeter heart," (Morrison 2008, 69) than her behavior would suggest, but Lina is not so sure. Later in the novel, we see Rebekka, broken by the loss of Jacob, drifting toward the protection—as well as the restrictions—of the local community.

## Conclusion

At the end, *A Mercy* represents what the new nation could have done and what the maturing country could have become. Morrison shows the reader the shaky beginnings of the plantation economy that sustained and is sustained by the institution of slave labor. It seems to have been a loose recreation of old country serfdom with the addition of racism as a convenient justification

for an economic system designed to be driven by free labor, designed to maintain a ruling class, designed to divide the labor classes, and destined to be oppressive. We see the violent ending of this institution in Morrison's novel *Beloved*, where this slave-ocracy weakened by its own corrupt nature is finally pulled apart by the ravages of war.

In the novel, the weakness of this economic system is shown as its dependence upon the patriarchal control of property. With the loss of Jacob Vaark, the *center* can no longer hold. The residents no longer answer to a master, and each in her/his own way begins to plan for a future that does not include one. While this lends potential to the lives of those in the servant class, it is a limited potential, for they are all landless. This is not necessarily the case for Rebekka Vaark, but only if she decides to marry again. Not only does Rebekka lose her husband and live in fear of losing her land to the patriarchal establishment, she loses her connection to the other women on the farm, a connection that had been forged in her isolation from the religious community that she and Jacob had never really belonged to. She realizes that her husband's disdain for community values has cost her the security she will now need.

In her exploration of the roots of slavery in North America, Morrison is closing a circle; having witnessed the ending of race based slavery in *Beloved*, the reader is able to witness its beginnings in *A Mercy*. The novel tells several stories and tells them from several points of view. But what is below the surface of the narrative is the agonizing question of why—the question that remained unresolved in *Beloved*. Morrison supplies some answers, but even more questions:

One realizes that there was no civilization that did not rest on some form of enslavement, whether it was Athens or Moscow, whether it was England or France. They called them different names—peons, serfs, what have you. But owning the labor of people was a constant in the world...The unusual thing was coupling it with racism...So for me it was the ideal place to see how all of this began. (Neary 2008)

Morrison begins the narrative with the assumption that things are suddenly worse in the land with the passage of new laws designed to prevent poor people, native people, and Africans from joining together to overthrow the power of wealthy white landowners. It is the separation of ethnic groups that is the object after the "People's War" (Bacon's Rebellion) of 1676. (Don Jordan and Michael Walsh 2007). In the generations after these events, indentured servitude is no longer viable because of the need for free people to own farms,—land that has been snatched must be controlled—and native people have been killed or pushed westward.

In seeking to identify the beginnings of raced based slavery in America, Morrison makes it clear that these events were *not* inevitable. There were many men like Jacob Vaark in North America, and the choice to *own* a servant was not universal. Jacob had vowed to "prove that his own industry could amass the fortune, the station, D'Ortega claimed without trading his conscience

for coin.” (Morrison 2008, 28-29) But in the end, he does just that. He finds himself taking ownership of Florens to settle D’Ortega’s debt and Sorrow a decade earlier to save himself the cost of a parcel of lumber. Lina “had been purchased outright and deliberately” (Morrison 2008, 34), and the acquisition of these people coincides with Jacob’s emerging desire for wealth. Jacob’s untimely death also helps to explain why the proliferation of slavery was not a sudden movement, depending as it on one slaveholder at a time. Not only did countless numbers of Africans die, as those in D’Orteta’s ship did, but the death of a slaveholder in the 17<sup>th</sup> century while laws regarding inheritance were still in flux and still did not favor women could lead to any number of unexpected outcomes for workers in bondage. Just as the individual had to alter his/her thinking somewhat to become a slaveholder (if he/she is not one already), so also did society need to arrive at mutual agreement about the laws that would govern labor in a slave holding community.

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