Speaking the Unspeakable in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*

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Abstract

The issues related to the identity of women, especially women of color, have been one of significant subjects of discussion in literary societies among postcolonial and feminist scholars since the last decades of the twentieth century. The reflection of this condition is palpable in literary works of African American female writers as the major theme of their fictional works. Toni Morrison (1931-), like her literary counterparts, portrays the prevalent condition of the lives of women in her novel *A Mercy* (2008). She wants to show that how the male-dominated power deprives women of their identity by subjugating and objectifying them, and how these women encounter an ambivalent and unhomely situation in dealing with both their culture and the colonial and dominant culture. In the light of postcolonial concepts of subaltern as defined by major figure of postcolonial studies, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1942-), this study tries to show that how Toni Morrison challenges and deconstructs the supremacy of colonial and patriarchal power in the Western societies. Moreover, this thesis sheds more light on how Morrison puts into question the stability and invincibility of the Western master narratives by using a fragmented and split style of novel writing in her novel *A Mercy*.

بیان ناگفتنی‌ها در رمان «یک محبت» تونی موریسون

مسائل مربوط به هویت زنان، به‌ویژه زنان رنگین‌پوست، یکی از موضوعات مهم بحث در جوامع ادبی در میان پژوهشگران پسا استعماری و فمینیستی از دهه‌های پایانی قرن بیستم بوده است. بازتاب این وضعیت در آثار ادبی نویسندگان زن آفریقایی-آمریکایی به‌عنوان موضوع اصلی آثار داستانی آن‌ها قابل‌مشاهده است. تونی موریسون (1931-)، مانند همتایان ادبی خود، شرایط غالب بر زندگی زنان را در رمان «یک محبت» (2008) به تصویر می‌کشد. او می‌خواهد نشان دهد که چگونه قدرت مردسالارانه زنان را با تحت سلطه درآوردن و شیءسازی از هویتشان محروم می‌کند، و چگونه این زنان در مواجهه با هر دو فرهنگ خود و فرهنگ استعماری و غالب، با موقعیتی دوگانه و نامأنوس روبه‌رو می‌شوند. با توجه به مفاهیم پسا استعماری و «زیردست» به‌گونه‌ای که توسط چهره‌ی برجسته‌ی مطالعات پسا استعماری، گایاتری چاکراورتی اسپیواک (1942-)، تعریف شده است، این پژوهش تلاش می‌کند نشان دهد که چگونه تونی موریسون برتری قدرت استعماری و مردسالارانه در جوامع غربی را به چالش کشیده و آن را واسازی می‌کند. علاوه بر این، این رساله به بررسی این موضوع می‌پردازد که چگونه موریسون با استفاده از سبکی تکه‌تکه و شکسته در نوشتن رمان «یک محبت»، پایداری و شکست‌ناپذیری روایت‌های کلان غربی را زیر سوال می‌برد.

کلمات کلیدی: یک محبت، موریسون، مطالعات پسا استعماری، اسپیواک، زیردست

Introduction

Toni Morrison and Black Women's Identity

It was as if the whole category of 'female writer' and 'black writer' had been redeemed. I felt I represented a whole world of women who were silenced or who had never received the imprimatur of the established literary world (Morrison, qtd. Davis 100).

This quotation is extracted from Toni Morrison's lecture delivered after accepting the Nobel Prize for her novel *Beloved* (1987) in 1993. She is the first African American woman who received this honor. Commentators on African American literature all agree that Morrison is "the first woman novelist to give such full expression to the experience of black girls and women" (Lister 5), and her novels, from a black feminist's vantage point, challenge the supremacy and domination of patriarchal power in the Western masculinized societies.

Postcolonial scholars, along with (Western) feminist theorists, try to challenge the supremacy of male power in literature, but postcolonial scholars put into question the main notions of (Western) feminism and, in particular, their "failure or inability to incorporate issues of race, or its propensity to stereotype or over-generalize the case of the Third World woman" (Bahri 202). Therefore, postcolonial feminism and black feminism have been formed with its emphasis- in contrast to Western feminism- to question the condition of Third World women in both patriarchal and colonial contexts where there is a "*collusion of patriarchy and colonialism*" (ibid). In this regard, Toni Morrison's novels lend themselves to "feminist readings because of how they challenge the cultural norms of gender, race, and class" (Beaulieu 12) and talk about the position of black women who are "victimized everywhere by both the system and the men, […] precisely because of their race and gender" (Davis 21).

Philip Page, in his book *Dangerous Freedom: Fusion and Fragmentation in Toni Morrison's Novels* (1995) regarding the structure of Toni Morrison's novels, notes that black women's novels' structure is "a whole yet divided self" (30), a unified entity which consists of many fragmented and split parts. In this way, he wants to compare women's status, in particular black women, in white masculinized communities to African Americans and believes that the language of black women writers recalls the equal situation of African American people. Page adds that both black women's identity and African Americans are split and fragmented under the oppressions and sufferings caused by white power in Western patriarchal countries. Using a fragmented and split

style, Morrison wants to deconstruct and disrupt the stability and invincibility of Western master narratives in their literature. In Bhabha's words, Morrison deconstructs the supremacy of the "English book" of Western culture (*Location of Culture* 102).

Moreover, one can perceive how this situation is reflected by women writers, specifically black women, by using a "splitting" (Page 9) style in their fictional works. John N. Duvall, in his book *The Identifying Fictions of Toni Morrison* (2000), thinks that Toni Morrison's depiction of characters in her novels "represent[s] aspects of that author" and "[t]o write is to write self" (11). Therefore, Morrison, like other African American women writers, wants to deconstruct and invert the "hierarchies that are unstably based on the supposed temporal privilege of one term of an opposition over the other" (Duvall 9). In this way, her fictional world challenges the "traditional notions of transcendent universals and bipolar oppositions" (Page 16) imposed by the patriarchal context as the superior power of the inferior nations.

Using split and fragmented style while keeping the unity and wholeness of black women writers is a means of resisting and challenging the domination of the binary system of being "subject/ object or self/other" (Page 9) created in male-dominated social systems. Morrison, like her counterparts, uses a fragmented style in the form of multiple streams of consciousness which seem to be completely confused and fragmented at first look but the main character, Florens, weaves together different parts. In other words, in *A Mercy*, the (hi)story of black women's slavery and their oppression and suppression in male-centered communities is told from different perspectives by different characters while keeping the wholeness and unity. The story is told and retold and shared by characters, disregard of their culture and color, through recalling the past events. Morrison, as a postmodern writer, wants to indicate the resistance and subversion of the hierarchy and domination of superior power over inferior peoples in her fictions.

In addition to what was mentioned above, one of the principal concerns and main oppositions that occupied Morrison's novels is "the tension between identity as a biological essence and identity as a social construction" (Duvall 9). In *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1998) or even *A Mercy* (2008), Morrison wants her readers to ask the question about the condition of the lives of women, in particular black women, in Western communities that how they are deprived of their own identity. The same as when she puts into question, in her book *Playing in the Dark:*

Whiteness and the Literary Imagination (1992), the description of the presence of African people and particularly black women in Eurocentric literature.

Therefore, Morrison's black characters' identity is simultaneously a "construction of multiple identities" (Duvall 10). W. E. B. Du Bios describes, in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), this condition of African Americans as "double-consciousness" which implies that "black Americans, rather than experiencing themselves and the world as an identity (with its implications of wholeness, unity and oneness), could only view the world in a doubled fashion since their sense of themselves as Americans was constantly undermined by the fact of being black" (16). Philip Page adds that "[o]ne response to this sense of doubleness is to embrace it, to assert the values of doubled consciousness and insider/outsider status. By so doing, one accepts oneself as a dynamic interplay of forces, whose blurred boundaries become potential strengths rather than absolute liabilities" (9).

Morrison, reflecting this matter in *A Mercy*, characterizes black women identity in a form of hybridization of different cultures and identities and in this way portrays black women ambivalence and unhomeliness toward the received and imposed situation. And, in the same line of interest like her postcolonial counterpart Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Morrison wants to question the "oversimplifying and essentializing" (Parker 258) notions regarding definition of identity imposed on African American women, Indian women or any subaltern group in male-centered societies. Morrison, in 1985 in a conversation with Gloria Naylor and quoted by Davis, identifies the project which has dominated her own imaginative world as "bringing to life the 'dead girl'", the black girl that "society has willed out of existence" (Davis 100). In other words, Toni Morrison, as a postmodern black feminist writer, "offers a disruption" of the stability and invincibility of Eurocentric "metanarratives" of being absolute truth by deconstructing its "race and gender discourses" (Davies 37) and reconstructs literally black female identity by "bringing her into living life" (ibid).

'Can the Subaltern be Heard?': *A Mercy*

The aim of this section is to discuss Toni Morrison's novel, *A Mercy*, in the light of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's notions regarding the identity of subaltern or marginalized groups, as argued in her influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1985), in the Western masculinized society.

Spivak laments, in her essay, for the situation of women in those societies and notes that the problem of the subjugated women is the problem of agency. She writes, in an introduction to *Companion to Postcolonial Studies* (2005), that "'Can the Subaltern Speak?' is about agency: institutionally validated action [… and] unless validated by dominant forms of knowledge and politics, resistance could not be recognized ('heard') as such" (xx). She goes on to discuss about that subject and writes that "subaltern in general, and the historically muted subject of the subaltern women in particular, was inevitably consigned to be either misunderstood or misrepresented through the self-interest of those with the power to represent" (ibid). Spivak's argument about this condition of female subaltern raises various critical notions, questions and discussions in this regard.

Different literary critics try to make clear Spivak's argument as expressed in her essay. Robert Dale Parker believes, in his book *How to Interpret Literature: Critical Theory for Literary and Cultural Studies* (2008), that Gayatri Spivak does not answer "No" to the question "Can the Subaltern Speak?", but she "sees the question as open, continuous, and unanswerable" (259). He writes that Spivak "leaves us hanging: [whether do] people speak for themselves or that they only think they speak for themselves while they speak for the ideas that are imposed on them" (ibid). But he concludes that the important thing in this regard is that Spivak, as a Derridean deconstructive, "casts aside audaciously essentialist conclusions about the individuals and groups and leaves the question [Can the Subaltern Speak?] both urgent and aporia" (ibid).

Bill Ashcroft et al., in *Key Concepts in Postcolonial Studies* (1998), along with Parker, assert that Spivak in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" wants to challenge the essentialist notions of dominant discourse about the identity of female subaltern and, they add at the end that, Spivak does not assert the inability of the subaltern to speak but only "a warning to avoid the idea that the subaltern can ever be isolated in some absolute, essentialist way from the play of discourses and institutional practices that give it its voice" (79). According to what has been discussed so far regarding the condition of female subalterns in imperial and colonial societies, one can analyze the condition of living of the female characters in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*. From the beginning to the end of the story, what connects the female characters whether black or white or Native American is the sharing sense of being oppressed and suppressed by the male-dominated power. When Morrison writes in the last chapter of the novel that "[t]o be a female in this place is to be

an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below" (*A Mercy* 163) shows the festering condition of women in the Western community.

If one looks from the above at the story of the life of these women- Florens, Rebekka, Lina and Sorrow- one can see how they have a common and shared destiny: they are deprived of their identity and, as a result, their existence depends on the presence of their white master, Jacob Vaark, therefore, they have no position and no identity in the masculinized Western world without him. Even this situation will be worse for the female servants, Florens, Lina, and Sorrow, if their Mistress Rebekka dies of smallpox as Lina asserts that "three unmastered women and an infant out here, belonging to no one, [will easily] become the wild game for anyone" (*A Mercy* 58). Morrison tries to show how these women are in search of their identity or, in other words, a secure place to call home in the patriarchal society. As shown in chapter three the female characters of the story have the feeling of, Homi K. Bhabha's term, 'unhomeliness' because they belong to nowhere with "no culture, no identity and no history" (Spivak, Can the Subaltern Speak? 87) in the patriarchal and colonial society. Not only can they find any position or any definition of culture and identity in their own community but also are rejected by the male-dominated power and ruling class. In this regard, Gayatri Spivak, adopting Gramscian term, names these marginalized or colonized groups in the male-centered society as subaltern.

As defined by Bill Ashcroft et al., the term subaltern refers to the groups in society, like "peasants, workers", who have "inferior rank[s]" than the "ruling classes" (215). Spivak's examples of subalterns include "women, Indian women and Third World women in particular" (Parker 257). Women, as a marginalized and colonized group, in the imperial and patriarchal communities experience the sharing sense of being 'unhomeliness' because of being deprived of their own identity, and the new-defined identity, being subject to the dominant power, is imposed on them by the ruling classes. Therefore, there is a close affinity between the two postcolonial concepts, unhomeliness and subaltern, and their existence is dependent on each other. When a group in a colonial and patriarchal society is marginalized with having no identity, as a subaltern, consequently this group experiences a situation of no belonging and, consequently, feels unhomeliness and sustaining. Morrison, arguing about the identity of African American people in white Western society in her book, asserts that white dominant power, to construct its own "history

and context", imposes "history-lessness and context-lessness" (*Playing in the Dark* 53) to the black people and deprives them of their true being and identity.

In *A Mercy*, it is completely tangible that the female characters, disregard of their color, are subjects of patriarchal domination. Jacob Vaark has assembled a heterogeneous group of women on his farm: Florens, an Angolan-Portuguese girl, who is exchanged to settle her master's debt to the white trader; Rebekka, a white-English girl, who is sold and sent by her father to be wife of Jacob Vaark, the white settler; Lina, a native American, whose village was devastated by sickness and then fired by white soldiers, and after that worked for a white family as a servant when she was yet a very young girl; Sorrow, a slow-witted girl, who grew up on a ship and one day is washed ashore and rescued by a white sawyer and his sons to be their servant. All these women are literally in one way or at the mercy of man and are silenced by the patriarchal power. Their situation of being simultaneously unhomely and subaltern connected these women as if to resist and challenge the prevailing condition in the masculinized society, they should be unified. Florens is endowed with being the central voice of this subaltern group to challenge the silencing power of white-patriarchal domination. In this regard, Florens, with a hybrid identity of being both Angolan and Portuguese, lives in a traumatic situation of being rejected by both white and black communities. She is the daughter of a slave woman who is brought to America by a Portuguese slave trader to work in New World's plantations.

Morrison, in this story, revives implicitly the trauma of the history of the death of six million slaves during their transfer from Africa to the New World in Atlantic Ocean as mentioned in her Nobel-rewarded novel, *Beloved* (1987). Even though the aim of this study is not to psychoanalyze Morrison's novels, it seems necessary to mention this point that as J. Brooks Bouson writes in an essay "'Speaking the Unspeakable': Shame, Trauma and Morrison's Fiction" that by "[d]ramatizing the physical and psychological abuse visited on African American in white America, Morrison [wants to] show that trauma can result not only from a single assault or discrete event but also from a constellation of life's experiences, a prolonged exposure to danger or a continuing pattern of abuse" (123). Moreover, he writes that Morrison, in her novels, portrays "the black-on-black violence that exists within African American community" (ibid).

Consequently, these traumatic experiences transfer from one nation to another, from mothers to daughters and when Florens's mother tries to explain the result of her little girl sending away,

she describes her dreadful experiences and wants her daughter to have "protection" (*A Mercy* 162). But the memories of her childhood events devastate Florens's mind constantly and she asks herself how a mother whose child needs her protection and affection can let a white man take her. Her feelings get worse when her lover, the blacksmith whom she loves madly, throws her out of his house because of neglecting to care of a black boy named Malaik while he is away and then justifies his action by recalling her state of being a slave.

But, her sense of being alone gets worse when she gets to a belief that both her mother and the blacksmith prefer the male person not her. She always imagines her mother's figure while standing and holding her boy's hand firmly in her hand. But her mother, trying to reason the action of her sending away, begins her confession with the phrase that "[n]either one will want your brother" as well (*A Mercy* 162). She wants to clarify for her daughter, however, she never hears that side of the story, that the same situation exists for her little brother on D'Ortega's farm but by sending her away, her mother believes that the little girl is protected for Vaark seems "human" and does not look at Florens as "pieces of eight" (166).

Morrison shows the position of being a black or colored woman in the patriarchal society which means subjugation and marginalization by the dominant power whereas the black or colored woman does not have any independent definition of identity and being. This situation is portrayed in the novel when Florens is sent by Rebekka to fetch the blacksmith in order to cure her Mistress, on her way, Florens runs into a village whose people, who seem Christian, seek for "the Black Man's minion" (113) or a "demon" (114). Since she is a black girl, they wonder about her color as though they "have never seen any human this black" (111) and begin to investigate her body carefully as if she is a demon. In order to escape from the threatening danger and saves her life, Florens shows them the letter written by Rebekka, which is a testimony of her identity that she belongs to the Vaark. Surprised by the letter, they take it from her to study and examine carefully while leaving Florens without any certificate of her identity or better to say any identification. She moans that "[s]omething precious is leaving me. I am a thing apart. With the letter, I belong and am lawful. Without it, I am a weak calf abandoned by the herd, a turtle without a shell, a minion with no telltale signs but darkness I am born with […]" (115).

One can see what Morrison depicts regarding the condition of the life and identity of women especially the colored women in the Western community is how these women's definition of

identity and being has been dependent on and only defined by the dominant power. It seems as if, using Spivak's words, the colonial and patriarchal power knows its own right to impose the wanted definition of identity and life on the female subaltern. This situation is prevalent for all female characters of the story and they experience or have experienced an equal condition. Lina, a Native American woman, shares similar experience with Florens. Reviewing her past memories, she recalls the time when she was yet a small child, her village was first "swept" (*A Mercy* 46) by a disease and then by the fire of white soldiers. Lina and two other boys, escaped to top of a beach tree from the wolves, were rescued by the white soldiers. Later on, she was "taken to live among kindly Presbyterians" who were so pleased to have her because they thought that "native women worked as hard as they themselves" (47) did. They named her Messalina and then used the shortened form, Lina, "to signal a sliver of hope" (ibid).

"Afraid of once more losing shelter, terrified of being alone in the world without family" (*A Mercy* 47), Lina tries to acknowledge and accept Christian rules. But being stubborn about her ritual beliefs, she is abandoned by Presbyterians and it is Vaark who buys her for working in his farm. When Vaark buys Lina from the Presbyterians, she is a "tall fourteen-year-old girl" (*A Mercy* 52). But before going any further, it is important to pay attention to some parts of the advertisement in which Vaark searched for finding a female servant:

'A likely woman who has small pox and measles…A likely Negro about 9 years…Girl or woman that is handy in kitchen sensible, speaks good English, complexion between yellow and black…Five years time of a white woman that understands County work, with a child upwards of two years…Mulatto Fellow very much pitted with small pox, honest and sober…White lad fit to serve…Wanted a servant able to drive a carriage, white or black…Sober and prudent woman who…' until he got to 'Hardy female, Christianized and capable in all matters domestic available for exchange of goods or specie' (52).

Through this scene, one can perceive the current situation of women, disregard of color or culture, in the Western masculinized society. Moreover, Morrison mentions the worst condition in this regard, since Lina has no position in the white society for being a female slave, consequently, she has "no standing in law, no surname and no one would take her word against a Europe" (*A Mercy* 52). She is just purchased and advertised like an object in the village newspaper to be bought by someone, a condition that is always put into question and criticized by both Western and black

feminist scholars regarding the objectification of women by the patriarchal society. While living in Vaark's farm, Lina experiences "an unrewarding life": "solitude" and negligence, and even she "nest[s] with the chickens until" just before Mistress Rebekka arrives (*A Mercy* 50). After Vaark's death and Rebekka's disease, because of smallpox, a traumatic feeling disturbs Lina's mind. She asks herself constantly that "[…] if Mistress die[s], what then? To whom [can] they turn?" (*A Mercy* 56) She knows that having no position in a male-dominated community, she, Florens, and Sorrow, have nothing to claim about their being without their Mistress Rebekka.

Lina, while standing by Rebekka's bed, repeats with herself that "[d]on't die, Miss. Don't." She thinks with herself that:

[T]hree unmastered women [herself, Sorrow, Florens] and an infant out here, alone, belonging to know one, [become easily] wild game for anyone. None of them [can] inherit; none [is] attached to a church or recorded in its books. Female and illegal, they would be interlopers, squatters, if they [stay] on after Mistress died, subject to purchase, hire, assault, abduction, exile (58).

Lina depicts the unstable situation of marginalized women in this society that how their lives and their identity, are dependent on the white dominated power. The unhomely and solitude condition of living on Vaark's farm overwhelms her, therefore she tries to revive her "neglected rites" and merges "European medicine with native, scripture with lore and recall[s] and invent[s] the hidden meaning of things. [She finds], in other words, a way to be in the world" (48). In addition to that and to fill her loneliness, she takes Florens completely under her wings from the early moments of Florens's entrance to Vaark's farm as if she is her mother and cares about her so much in a way that even never lets Sorrow come close toward Florens.

Sorrow, another servant in Vaark's farm, although accepted by Jacob Vaark not bought, lives in the same condition as other female servants. She is a "daft"-"vixen-eyed"-black girl with "black teeth and a head of never groomed wooly hair the color of setting sun" and the daughter of a Captain whose ship drowned and one day she is "dragged ashore by whales" (*A Mercy* 51) and found by a sawyer's boys. Her name is given by Sawyer's wife to her for Sorrow does not remember her past and her account of life seems sorrowful. While being in Sawyer's farm, Sorrow just keeps "wandering off getting lost, [and knows] nothing and work[s] less, [she is just like] a strange melancholy girl" (*A Mercy* 51). Being afraid of her sons' "very close attention" and after "a winter of feeding the daft girl", the sawyer's wife asks her husband to get rid of Sorrow (ibid).

When Vaark "accept[s]" her, she is already pregnant and after delivering her baby, Lina tells her that the baby is born dead, whereas Lina, maybe for believing that Sorrow is "bad luck in the flesh" (*A Mercy* 53) for Vaark's farm and family, wraps the baby "in a piece of sacking and set[s] it a-sail in the widest part of the stream and far below the beavers' dam" (123). But her second pregnancy makes a complete change in her for she thinks that she has done "something, something important, by herself" (133) and as a result, Sorrow changes her name to "Complete" (134).

Sorrow is "flushed with pleasure at the thought of a real person, a person of her own" (*A Mercy* 123), and finds herself and the lost piece of her being and identity. Now, "prompted by the legitimacy of her new status as a mother," (133) she can define her role in society as a mother, a role that has been deprived from Rebekka and Lina tries to have it by taking care of Florens as if she is her real daughter. Rebekka, their white Mistress who came from England, experiences a condition that seems to some extent better than the colored women of the story but she knows and asserts the fact that in this "disorderly, threatening world out there, protection from which he [Vaark] alone could provide" (88) and consequently without his existence and protection, even Rebekka cannot escape from this horrible situation of subjugation of women whether white or black.

She is the last person in this group whose life story is depicted in a bitter situation by Morrison. Rebekka, like the other female characters, is in search of a home and a secure place whereas in spite of being a white person, she feels as if she is in exile. While lying on her bed and hearing the sound of death that calls her name, she recalls her past memories and experiences from the time that she is sent by her father to America. She knows her situation as a white woman in this New World and tells Lina that "[y]ou and I, this land is our home, but unlike you, I am exile here" (*A Mercy* 59). This sentence provides good hints to understand better the condition of women, disregard of their color, in this Western masculinized community. Rebekka is sent from England to the New World, America, to become Jacob Vaark's wife. A sixteen-year-old girl, she knows that her father "would have shipped her off to anyone who would book her passage and relieve him of feeding her" (*A Mercy* 74). Although it seems to be a bargain or a "sale" rather than an exchange for "love or need" (74) of the girl, Rebekka is now free from the cruelties of the male-centered society of England. She is wondered by the idea that "what her life would have been had she stayed crushed into those reeking streets, spat on by lords and prostitutes, curtseying,

curtseying, curtseying, [the memories that] still repel[s] her" (77). In fact, her sending off is a kind of "escape" (77) from the prevailing situation of London society.

In this way, Morrison depicts the unbearable condition that even a white woman cannot escape from it and should bear on in the Western communities that even sending off to a "Church School to be trained for domestic service" or "the promise of a married bliss" calls into mind a kind of "rescuing" (*A Mercy* 77) from the current situation. According to Rebekka, or better to say, Morrison, the prospects that are put ahead of a woman in those societies are "servant, prostitute, wife, and although horrible stories [are] told about each of those careers, the last one seem[s] safest" (78). Rebekka knows that in the case of the last one, becoming Vaark's wife, she "might have children and therefore be guaranteed some affection" (ibid). Therefore, marriage to an "unknown husband" (78) in a far land may provide good advantages for a woman like Rebekka because, in this way, she can "escape" from her "male siblings who worked days and nights with her father and learned from him their dismissive attitude toward the sister who had helped rear them; but especially escape from the leers and rude hands of any man, drunken or sober" (ibid). This is a gloomy picture of the existing condition of the female subalterns in the imperial and colonial countries who seek a situation to announce their being and identity. Rebekka finds traveling to "America" as an escape from this condition and believes that "[w]hatever the danger, how could it possibly be worse?" (78)

Looking over her book of memories and past events, she compares the difficult situation that she bore on during her lifetime, especially after entering Vaark's home and then losing her husband and her four babies, one after another, to that of Job's. Rebekka concludes that whatever difficult situation happened to Job and whatever he bore on is not "proof of His power everyone accepted that, [but] he want[s] simply to catch His eye. To be recognized not as worthy or worthless, but to be noticed as a life-form by the One who made and unmade it" (*A Mercy* 91). She, then, goes on to put into question the patriarchy and masculinity of Christianity by stating that "[b]ut then Job was a man. Invisibility was intolerable to men. What complaint would a female Job dare to put forth?" (*A Mercy* 91) Rebekka is aware of the discrimination between men and women that exists in Christianity and, consequently, she answers her own question in this way that if a female Job dares to complain, "He deign[s] to remind her of how weak and ignorant she [is]" (ibid).

Moreover, Rebekka knows that whether her shipmates or the "churched women" of her village, despite their moral distinctions from each other, share subjugation to man: "[a]lthough they [have] nothing in common the views of each other, they [have] everything in common with one thing; the promise and threat of men" (*A Mercy* 98). She believes that women in the masculinized society, live in one way or the other: some like Lina who has "experienced both deliverance and destruction" (ibid) from men, withdraw from them; others like "slow-witted" Sorrow, who "never coached by other females", become men's "play"; yet those who are "pious," obey them and "a few, like herself, after a mutually loving relationship, [become] like children when the man [is] gone" (ibid). From Spivak's point of view, this condition shows that how women are "constructed as the object of super-exploitation within capitalist" society (Spivak 98).

Morrison, in this way, wants to question the social and religious systems of Western communities. She writes, as a general rule in patriarchal societies, that women like Rebekka who are widows without any child to claim upon it her motherhood, and "[w]ithout the status or shoulder of a man, without the support of family or well-wishers, [they are] in practice illegal" (*A Mercy* 98). Morrison, through Rebekka's point of view, argues the social and religious notions regarding the issues of women in the Western countries and questions the role and power of Christianity in solving women's issues. Rebekka, implicitly, asks about God's mercy on humans and His kindness at the time of the "abyss" in her life, she questions whether "[t]hat was Lina [or] was it God?" that "dressed herself in hides, carried a basket and an axe, braved the thigh-high drifts, the mind-numbing wind, to get to the river"(*A Mercy* 99) to bring food, when she, Patrician and Lina were about to die from starvation in a cold-freezing season while Vaark was away on a journey. Rebekka wonders that "…in an abyss of loss, […] the journey to this land, the dying off of her family, her whole life, in fact, [are] way-stations marking a road to revelation. Or perdition? How would she know?" (100).

The feeling of no-belonging and loneliness disrupts her weak faith in a way that she thinks her "salvation" (*A Mercy* 100) and rescuing from this abyss of her life rested in the hands of a blacksmith, who once like a "healer" (148) saved Sorrow's life from an unknown disease, not in God's power. After the blacksmith comes to her home to visit her, he tells Rebekka that she is already in good condition and is cured of small pox. Surprised by this event, Rebekka gradually gets to this belief that it was God who cured her, not the blacksmith. But her behavior changes

completely in a way that Florens thinks that "Mistress has cured but she is not well": she "prays much and wears dark clothes", "slaps Sorrow" many times, makes Lina, Florens, Sorrow and her baby girl "sleep whether in cowshed or store" disregard of the weather condition, as though her "churchgoing alters her" (*A Mercy* 159). It seems that only those women who are at the service of church or "churched women," (147) as Rebekka points, has identity in this community. It is easy to perceive that how institutionalized and masculinized religion that is at the service of male-dominated power is put into question by Morrison.

In the last section of the novel, the prologue to the story of the lives of the marginalized women in the Western community, Morrison again, implicitly, puts into question God's mercy and its relation to the existing condition of women whether colored or black women. Florens's mother, in a monologue, tries to clarify the reason for sending her daughter away with a white man. She explains for Florens her own life story how she was brought to the New World by white traders in canoes with the complicity of black men and how she was treated just like a "cargo" (*A Mercy* 165) before landing on earth. She describes for her little girl the horrible stories of misery, rape, suppression and oppression, sufferings after she was purchased by her white master as if she is an animal: "we were made to jump high, to bend over, to open our mouths" (ibid). the traces of the feeling of losing home, unhomeliness, and no-belonging in Florens's mother are evident as well when she tries to describe her dreadful experience for her daughter and moans for her lost country: "[i]t was there I learned how I was not a person from my country, nor from my families" (*A Mercy* 165). In the new land, America, she gets to this recognition that the result of these sufferings is that she is "negrita" and "everything: language, dress, gods, dance, habits, decoration, song-all of it cooked together in the color of [her] skin" (ibid). She knows that since she is a black, she has been brought and purchased and raped by her white master, D'Ortega. Therefore, she does not want her littler daughter, who is going to attract the D'Ortegas' attention, to have similar destiny like her own and want "protection" (*A Mercy* 162) for her little girl. When Jacob Vaark comes to visit D'Ortega to "close the debt", Florens's mother finds out that "the tall man, [Vaark,] see [her girl] as a human child, not pieces of eight" (*A Mercy* 166). Then she kneels before him and begs for taking Florens for she is aware that even though in Vaark's farm "there is no protection but there is difference" (ibid).

Vaark accepts Florens instead of his master's debt but her mother wonders whether it was a miracle "bestowed by God" or a "mercy offered by a human" (167). She hopes that her daughter one day will understand why she has sent her away while Florens need her mother's existence and protection: "[t]o be given dominion over another is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing" (167). It seems necessary to note at the end that, Morrison, by giving voice to her subjugated female characters to cry out their identity and being, wants to challenge the imposed essentialist notions regarding the identity of the colonized women. Central to these voices that discussed so far is Florens's. In the last section of the novel, the reader understands that Florens is writing while narrating her own life story and during the narration of the story, she reveals her memories, her true feelings and the events experienced in her life and in the way to get to the blacksmith whom she loves madly. She writes her story on the walls and the floor of Jacob Vaark's new house, although entering Vaark's mansion is forbidden by Mistress, she goes there at night when all are sleep. She is hopeful that one day her story will be read by the blacksmith, but suddenly she remembers that he cannot read her telling: "you read the world but not the letters of talk. You don't know how to. Maybe one day you will learn" (*A Mercy* 160). Florens's written words, "closed up and wide open," covered all parts of the house, they "will talk to themselves" and "perhaps these words need the air that is out in the world" (ibid). In a sense, one can infer that Morrison is hopeful that one day the words or the voice of subaltern women who "need to fly" and will "fall like ash over acres of primrose and mallow…beyond eternal hemlocks, through clouds…," (*A Mercy* 161) can be heard by the male ruling class of the society. In this way, there will be no more "salve" but all are "free" (ibid).

Conclusion

Toni Morrison, in her latest novel *A Mercy*, has chosen different female characters with different culture and identity to show the prevailing condition that exists for women in the Western male-dominated society. She portrays a situation in which these women disregard of their color are deprived of their own identity and the wanted definition of identity is imposed on them and, consequently, they are forced to be silenced by the patriarchal power. As one can perceive, Morrison, as a black feminist, wants to resist and challenge the domination of male power and to do so, she endows the female characters of the story with, voice or, better to say, the right to speak.

Therefore, these women are in search of a definition of their own identity and a position in the masculinized society in order to announce their existence. In this way, Toni Morrison tries to deconstruct and disrupt the essentialist notions of the Euro-American male-centered society regarding the identity of women, in particular women of color.

It is important to note here, in Gayatri Spivak's words, that the female subaltern can speak and asserts their own being and identity but it is the imperial and colonial society that refuses to hear their voice. But Morrison is hopeful that "one day," the western patriarchal society will "learn… to read… the words of talk" (*A Mercy* 160) and consequently, there won't be any subjugation and objectification of women that day and all women will be "free" (161).

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