

Maternal Healing: Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*

Hwa-Jeong Kim

(Chonbuk National University)

Kim, Hwa Jeong. "Maternal Healing: Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*." *Studies in English Language & Literature* 45.1 (2019): 21-39. Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* focuses the era in which the foundations of racial slavery were just being laid, in the late 17th century. Females need the protection of men and experience difficulties in being independent in those days. Most of the main characters in *A Mercy* are orphans. They were abandoned by their parents for one reason or another. Because of this traumatic memory, they want to have attachments to compensate their experiences of loss in their childhood. Whatever those attachments are, they are fascinated by the current situation and overcompensation leads them to fail to fulfill their wishes and experience another loss. Even though many things have happened to their lives; losing a husband, children, and lovers, they were not sure what those meant at that time. However, the female characters eventually realize that the true mercy comes by remembering motherhood. Motherhood motivates them to have power and to stand up once again. Finally they can face to the threat of men and the world. (Chonbuk National University)

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I. Introduction

Motherhood is a dominant theme in Toni Morrison's novels. In the reflections on motherhood in her works, Morrison emphasizes a developed theory of African mothering that is fundamentally grounded on the prevailing political and philosophical attitudes of black womanhood. Andrea O'Reilly states, "Building upon

black women's experience of, and perspectives on motherhood, Morrison develops a view of black motherhood that is, in terms of both maternal identity and role, radically different than the motherhood practised and prescribed in the dominant culture" (O'Reilly 1). Morrison characterizes maternal identity as a significant source of power for black women. This position of power inspires black women to actively engage in maternal practices that aim to empower children.

Patricia Hill Collins also defines "black motherhood as a site of power for women in Morrison's works" (Collins, 1991 11, 1993 42). Collins examines how perspectives on the black female have evolved to oppose and resist the prevailing views or oppressive images of black womanhood. Collins states that "the dominant ideology of the slave era fostered the creation of socially constructed images of black womanhood, each reflecting the dominant group's interest in maintaining black women's subordination" (Collins, 1991 71, 1994 45). From the standpoint of Collins, "Morrison is an intellectual who takes the core themes of black motherhood and develops from them a new consciousness of black motherhood that empowers African American women and engenders resistance" (Collins, 1991 13). In essence, Morrison's viewpoint on black motherhood equips black women with the means to defy the oppressive and negative perceptions of black womanhood within the dominant culture; the ultimate goal of such resistance is to empower future generations.

Such underlying theme of female empowerment is expressed in Toni Morrison's 2008 historical fiction, *A Mercy*. The novel's central story is of a young slave girl named Florens; she lives on a plantation where its Portuguese owners are cruel to their slaves. Florens' mother, Minha mae, asks Jacob Vaark, a trader, to take Florens away from the plantation as payment for a debt. From this traumatic experience, young Florens feels abandoned by her mother. Like Florens, the other main characters of *A Mercy* are abandoned by their parents for one reason or another. They are traumatized by the separation from their families, especially from their mothers. As orphans, the main characters fail to form mother-and-child relationships

and search for their identities because of the traumatic memories from their childhood. These memories extremely affect them throughout their lives.

Being separated from one's parents is a serious experience. Splitting¹ is one of several psychic mechanisms to which both object relations theory and self-psychology are called to attention. "This mechanism includes both normal developmental processes as well as defensive processes. After the serenity of the womb, the infant experiences life as a chaotic discontinuity, and splitting is related to processes that allow the infant to let in as much of the environment that it can manage, without the whole indigestible experience. Thus, early splitting refers to the maturational inability" (Clair 10).

This study will focus on how maternal bond affects to overcome the traumatic childhood memories of the main characters causing the maturational inability and how the main characters show defensive processes to overcome the early splitting experience. The analysis will then extend to a discussion of the potential for healing. Finally, the conclusion will show that the trauma, which the main characters of *A Mercy* have experienced, could be ultimately overcome, depending on remembered bonds of motherhood.

¹ The concept of splitting was first described by Ronald Fairbairn in his formulation of object relations theory; "it begins as the inability of the infant to combine the parent's fulfilling aspects (the good object) and unresponsive aspects (the unsatisfying object) in the same individual; in other words, the infant sees the good and bad as separate features. In psychoanalytic theory this functions as a defense mechanism. Splitting creates instability in relationships because one person can be viewed as either a personified virtue or a personified vice at different times, depending on whether they gratify the subject's needs or frustrate them. Furthermore, splitting contributes to unstable relationships and intense emotional experiences. Splitting is common during adolescence, but it is transient. Splitting especially noted among people who are diagnosed with borderline personality disorder. Treatment for splitting has been developed for individuals, couples and groups; the treatment strategies are based on the dialectical behavior therapy. Additionally, self-help books on topics like mindfulness and emotional regulation are recommended for individuals who struggle with the consequence of splitting" (William Ronald Fairbairn 139).

II. Traumatic Memories

Psychological trauma² has significantly caught the public's interest, and it has been studied and discussed extensively within many professional fields. The interest in psychological trauma will not be decreased because people are constantly confronted with media reports or personal testimonies about the horrific effects of accidents, war and mistreatment. "For centuries, it has been common knowledge that survivors of horrific events may suffer ongoing distress. Descriptions of this clearly show the effects of these events as marking survivors with deep, disturbing and debilitating psychological scars. Furthermore, the definitions of psychological trauma have been heavily influenced by medical models of physical trauma" (Wastell 15).

When black characters express black struggle, "Morrison's work concludes that uncontrolled nostalgic memory provides psychic relief because treatment for trauma involves helping the ego to feel safe and secure by building self-esteem and social connections" (Schreiber ix). The foundation of Morrison's communities is made up of "interwoven strands of private wounds, with each generation passing along familial as well as communal trauma to its youth. Trauma, attachment, and cultural theories explain the lingering effects of ancestral trauma" (Schreiber 29).

How Morrison's novels trace the success or failure to rebuild oneself through home forms the basis of the discussion. Exploring the experience of slavery and its aftermath, "Morrison's work traces the lives of black Americans from children through old age, in a range of class and geographical situations, through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She follows the struggle of blacks to create subjectivity without a positive gaze for them in the master narrative" (Schreiber 26),

² An old definition of psychological trauma is exemplified by Drever (1952). Trauma is "an emotional shock, producing a disturbance, more or less enduring of mental functions. The concept of 'shock' is central to this definition of trauma because shock is a sudden depression of the nervous system or nervous exhaustion produced by violent emotion, accident, surgical operation, etc.; such an approach theorizes that psychological trauma is primarily a physical injury to the nervous system" (Wastell 16).

and so the discussion begins with "an investigation of how the abusive experience of slavery and its legacy of cultural rejection create trauma, low self-esteem, and anxiety for the black community on individual, familial, and group levels" (Schreiber 27). Morrison's characters portray the psychological and cultural challenges as well as the difficult personal victories that are possible when one verbalizes the trauma and shares the traumatic experiences within their community.

In *A Mercy* all the characters are orphans. They fail to form object relation with their mothers in their early age, which makes them experience difficulties in their lives. "The term "object relations" has occupied a central place in much psychoanalytic writing in the past few years. "Objection relations" usually means personal relations, and discussions of object relations usually center on the early relations of a child and mother and how this early relationship shapes the child's inner world and later adult relationship" (Clairiii). Because of the loss of mother-child relationships, the characters in *A Mercy* struggle to overcome their orphanage.

In *A Mercy*, the main characters' orphanage is depicted with Jacob Vaark. Jacob, the owner of a farm, was abandoned by his father at an early; his mother died before he ever knew her. Jacob's uncle, whom Jacob had never met, "died and left him one hundred and twenty acres of 'a dormant patroonship' in a climate he preferred" and "a ratty orphan became a landowner" (11, 12).³ Jacob started his new life in Maryland with its four distinct seasons. He was an orphan, but through an inheritance, he became a landowner, "making a place out of no place and a temperate living from raw life" (13).

One day, Jacob was invited to a partner's house in a plantation called Jublio. D'Ortega, the partner, asked to dine with Jacob. Jacob saw "D'Ortega's grandiose house, with its honey colored stone, was in truth more like a place where one held court and appraise it" (15). He had never seen a house like it. Jacob was fascinated.

³ An excerpt from- *A Mercy* (2008) written by Toni Morrison and published by Alfred A. Knopf, New York.

and he thought it would be easy to build such a big house, despite Maryland's hot weather.

D'Ortega, the owner of the fancy house, wanted more credit and six additional months to pay what he had borrowed from Jacob. D'Ortega reasoned that "accidents beyond his control made him unable to pay his debt" (16); therefore D'Ortega asked Jacob to take one of his slaves. Jacob refused because his farm was modest and his trade needed only him; however, at D'Ortega's insistence, "Jacob trailed him to identify the slaves' talents, weaknesses and possibilities" (16, 22). Then Jacob saw "a woman standing in the doorway with two children" (23). She looked healthy and well fed, unlike the other slaves. Jacob was sure that D'Ortega would refuse if he chose the woman, but "he still chose the woman" (24). A startled D'Ortega refused, but Jacob reminded D'Ortega of "his initial promise" (24) that Jacob could choose any of the slaves. Upon hearing this, the woman begged for Jacob to take her young daughter, Florens, instead of her. She then "knelt suddenly and closed her eyes" (26). At last Jacob wrote a new deal with D'Ortega to take the little girl as payment. This was the first meeting of Jacob and Florens.

Jacob excused the bargain by thinking that Rebekka, his wife, would be eager to have Florens, but what was truer was another thing. His childhood experiences taught him that there was no better place in the world for wives and children than within the generosity of strangers. He refused to be sentimental about his own orphan hood, but he could not deny his early experiences. He was told that "his mother died in childbirth, and his father left him with a name, that was easily punned" (32). Thus Jacob could not refuse Florens when he thought about his life as an orphan. His action was an act of mercy towards Florens and her mother.

This was not the first time that Jacob brought female orphans into his house. A decade ago a sawyer asked him "to take off a girl found half dead on a riverbank" (33). Jacob agreed to do it, providing that the sawyer forgave the cost of the lumber Jacob was buying. At that time Jacob's farm needed more help, and Rebekka was pregnant; therefore, Jacob did what was necessary. Like other orphans, Jacob also

saved Rebekka's life. When Rebekka was a mistress, her father received a notice from a young man looking for a strong wife. Because Rebekka's prospects were to be a servant, prostitute, or a wife, Rebekka's father quickly offered his eldest girl, Rebekka, to the young man. Soon she traveled on the *Anglelus* to meet her bridegroom. Upon landing, Rebekka and the young man, Jacob, noticed that "they were ideal" (20) for each other.

Lina was already in Jacob's place when Rebekka arrived. It took a while for trust to grow between Rebekka and Lina. And yet, because both were alone and without a family, they became "a companion" (75) to each other. When Rebekka's first child was born, Lina handled it so tenderly that Rebekka was ashamed of her initial fears of Lina.

Sorrow, "whose mother was throwing away" (34), was also rescued by Jacob. Sorrow, a captain's daughter, was half drowned when two young sailors saved her. "Sorrow had been living alone on a foundered ship, and the people in the ship thought she was a boy" (51). Sorrow was found by a sawyer's wife who took her in and named her Sorrow. Sorrow lived with the sawyer's family until she became pregnant by the sawyer's son. The sawyer's wife, upon seeing Sorrow's state, asked her husband to send Sorrow away; "he obliged and offered her to the care of a customer, Jacob, trusted to do Sorrow no harm" (51).

Among the women in Jacob's farm, only Lina had been purchased deliberately. Jacob bought her from a Presbyterian community. He had searched "the advertisements" (52) posted at the printer's in town. Lina, a native woman, had no clan because "people in blue uniforms came and set on fire the whole village Lina lived in" (47). When news of the deaths that had swept her village were heard, Lina was taken to live among kind Presbyterians. They named her Messalina. They were pleased to have her, but their pleasure did not last long. She was later abandoned by the Presbyterians, and they offered her up for sale.

The last one to arrive at Jacob's place was Florens. Florens remembered her mother who sent her to Jacob saying, "Take the girl, my daughter" (7). Florens

remembered her mother with a baby boy still at her breast. Florens remembered "her mother nursing greedy babies, saying something to her, and still holding the little boy's hand" (8). So they were gathered Jacob's place with their own stories.

According to a study of child care by British psychologist, John Bowlby, "the observations of older children who were deprived in infancy, the children who committed numerous delinquencies, who seemed to have no feelings for anyone and were very difficult to treat, were found to have had grossly disturbed relationships with their mothers in their early years. Persistent stealing, violence, egotism, and sexual misdemeanors were among their less pleasant characteristics" (Bowlby 36). All women in Jacob's house were saved by Jacob from their lives as orphans before something bad happens to them. But Jacob's mercy did not work very well to improve their lives because their traumatized memories of being abandoned in their childhood affected them so seriously. The anecdotal evidence that maternal deprivation during a child's early years has a negative impact in a child's personality growth is a call to action. "It is believed that to be essential for mental health is that the infant and young child should experience a warm, intimate, and continuous relationship with his or her mother or mother-substitute in which both find satisfaction" (Bowlby 76). A young child requires constant reassurance from his or her mother; that somehow, he or she makes his or her mother feel proud and pleased. "The provision of mothering can not be considered in terms of hours per day, but only in terms of the enjoyment of each other's company which mother and child obtain" (Bowlby 77).

"The mother-love which a young child needs is so easily provided within the family, and is too difficult to provide outside it. The services which mothers and fathers habitually render their children are so taken for granted that their greatness is forgotten. The children who did not make family bond in their families want to have the attachments as substitutes on behalf of their mothers' love" (Bowlby 78).

III. Searching for ways to overcome loss

When John Bowlby was first developing the attachment theory⁴, he became aware of some evidences to support his study. Jude Cassidy states that "Bowlby's observations led not only to his belief that the child's relationship with the mother is more important for later functioning, but also to a belief that this relationship is of critical immediate importance to the child" (2). At the time, widely accepted theories that offered explanations for the child's tie to the mother were secondary-drive theories. Psychoanalytic and social learning theorists proposed that "an infant's relationship with mother emerges because she feeds the infant, and that the pleasure experienced upon having hunger drives satisfied comes to be associated with mother's presence" (Cassidy 3).

Cassidy states "for Bowlby, this strong tie, evident particularly when disrupted, results not from an associational learning process, but rather from a biologically based desire for proximity that arose through the process of natural selection" (Cassidy 3). Cassidy emphasizes Bowlby proposed that during the time in which humans were evolving, when they lived in what he called, the environment of evolutionary adaptedness, genetic selection favored attachment behaviors because they increased the likelihood of child-mother proximity, which in turn increased the likelihood of protection and provided survival advantage" (Cassidy 4).

⁴ Attachment theory is a psychological model that attempts to describe the dynamics of long-term and short-term interpersonal relationships between humans. However, "attachment theory is not formulated as a general theory of relationships. It addresses only a specific facet"; how human beings respond within their relationships when they are hurt, are separated from loved ones, or are feeling threatened. Essentially all infants become attached to any caregiver, but there are individual differences in the quality of the relationships. When infants are alarmed, attachment as a motivational and behavioral system directs the child to seek proximity with a familiar caregiver because they expect that they will receive protection and emotional support. John Bowlby believed that the tendency for primate infants to develop attachments to familiar caregivers was the result of evolutionary pressures, since attachment behavior would facilitate the infant's survival in the face of dangers such as predation or exposure to the elements (Waters & Anafarta 80).

When people could not be satisfied with the child-mother relationship in their early years, they need to discover the attachment bond in their lifetime. Introduced by Bowlby and Ainsworth, "attachment bond is a specific type of bond that falls under the umbrella of 'affectional bonds'" (Cassidy 12). Throughout their lifetime, people create a variety of significant affectional bonds, as they look for comfort and security in their interpersonal relationships. In such a case that distressed infant or children separated from their mothers may seek comfort from strangers. But the strength of having an attachment is sometimes mistakenly regarded as reflecting the "strength" of the attachment bond.

The main characters in *A Mercy* want to overcome and compensate the traumas of their being orphans because they could not build affectional bond with their mothers in their early age. Melanie Klein⁵ is known to be one of the primary founders of object relations theory. She states "in early infancy anxieties characteristic of psychosis arise which drive the ego to develop specific defence-mechanisms and fixation-points for all psychotic disorders are to be found in this period" (1). Klein's theory of psychoanalysis is based on the assumption that all individuals have within them a internalized, and primarily unconscious realm of relationships. These relationships are relative to not only the world around the individual, but more specially those other individuals that surround the subject. "Object relation theory focuses primarily on the interaction individuals have with

⁵ Melanie Klein, an Austrian-British author and psychoanalyst, is known for her work in the world of developmental psychology. Her observation and novel therapeutic techniques for adolescents had a profound effect on child psychology as well as contemporary psychoanalysis. Klein was one of the first to use traditional psychoanalysis with young children. She was innovative in both her techniques (such as working with children using toys) and her theories on infant development. By observing and analyzing the play and interactions of children, Klein built onto the work of Freud's unconscious mind. "While Freud's ideas concerning children mostly came from working with adult patients, Klein was innovative in working directly with children, often as young as two years old. Klein saw children's play as their primary mode of emotional communication. While observing children play with toys such as dolls, animals, plasticine, pencil and paper, Klein documented their activities and interactions, then attempted to interpret the unconscious meaning behind their play" (Klein 138. 139).

others, how those interactions are internalized, and how these now internalized object relations will affect one's psychological framework" (Melanie Klein 1, 2, 13). The Object refers to typically another individual, and encompasses the intended facet that people outside of the self, are very much fluid and as such may be classified as objects. "The use of the term object seeks to reference more the potential embodiment of fear, desire, envy or other emotional variations of such feelings in such a way that the object and the subject are separated allowing for a more simplistic approach to addressing the deprived areas of need when used in the clinical setting" (Melanie Klein 1, 2, 13).

For Jacob, building a large house was a way for him to compensate for the loss of not knowing his mother. While Jacob was leaving D'Ortega's house, he envied the house, the gate, and even the fence. He thought, "it might be nice to have such a fence to enclose the headstones" (27). Jacob was eager to build a big house, despite the hot weather. He had never thought that he could be the owner of a fancy house; during its construction, "Jacob had never been seen in better spirits" (44). Unfortunately, his obsession with building such a grand house ruined himself and his family. One of the horses Jacob borrowed kicked Jacob's daughter in the head. Then, when the house was close to completion, Jacob fell sick because "the fever of building was so intense that it put Jacob in the grave" (89). Jacob lost his life, even though he showed mercy to the orphans and gave them new lives.

When Florens arrived in Jacob's farm, Florens belonged to Lina. As mothers and daughters do, Florens and Lina "slept together, bathed together, ate together and Lina made clothes and tiny shoes from rabbit skin for Florens" (124). Lina had fallen in love with Florens right away as soon as she saw Florens shivering in the snow. Years later, when the blacksmith came to the farm, Lina was worried for Florens because "she was struck down with another sickness much longer lasting and far more lethal" (127). Florens admired and was distracted by the blacksmith. Lina wanted to protect Florens, but since the blacksmith's arrival, Lina saw an interest in Florens that Lina recognized as once her own. Eventually, without her pet

Florens to take care of, Lina was like "a silent workhorse" (132); she seemed to have lost appetite of everything, including feeding herself.

Florens fell in love with the blacksmith. Florens said, "she is alive for the first time" (38). On the morning when the blacksmith came to work on Jacob's house, Florens stood still, like "a startled doe" (45) when he asked if this was Jacob's place. Like Jacob, "the blacksmith had rights and privileges; the blacksmith could marry, own things, travel, and even sell his own labor" (98). "Florens was completely smitten" (98), and as she explained her attachment to the blacksmith (97), Florens wondered to herself "why mother chooses me not to live [...] " (115). This experience was important because when Florens sees the blacksmith and falls in love with him, she knew she is alive.

When the blacksmith left his home to save Rebekka from her illness, Florens watched over Malaik, a young boy who the blacksmith was taking care of. However, Florens identified Malaik as her younger brother who her mother was holding in her arms when Florens was sent away. Florens said, "this thing happens before (136, 137), and Florens thought that she was abandoned by her mother because of her younger brother. As Florens looked at Malaik, she was worried that Malaik would be closer to the blacksmith than her. She did not want to be expelled again. Moreover, Florens saw an illusion that Minha mae was standing by the blacksmith's cot, and this time, her mother's baby boy was Malaik; in that illusion, Malaik was holding Minha mae's hand.

Driven by fear, Florens hid Malaik's doll, which was his precious belonging. While Malaik was crying and screaming, Florens clutched and pulled his arm harshly to make him stop. Malaik's shoulder cracked; he screamed then fainted. At that moment the blacksmith returned, and upon seeing the scene, his face distorted with rage. He told Florens to go. In the end, Florens, who did not want to be abandoned by the blacksmith because she felt alive with him, lost her lover and was living but dying inside.

Undeniably, the main characters in *A Mercy* search for ways to reconcile with

and overcome their traumatic memories, but their efforts end up failing because of something important missing in their paths, and they are so eager that they could not remember what that important thing is.

IV. Remembering True Mercy

By compelling an individual to experience the agony of loss, to remember memories of the deceased while also realizing that the deceased is no longer present, "to yearn for the deceased's proximity and love, attachment system hyperactivation allows the mourner to explore the meaning and significance of the loss and find ways of reorganizing symbolic bonds with the lost loved one. When this form of hyperactivation is tolerable and manageable, that is, not overwhelming or disorganizing" [...] it enables the despairing person to integrate the past into the present without pieces of personal history and identity" (Cassidy 57).

To overcome their struggles as orphans, the main characters of *A Mercy* want to have their own attachment bond because "unsolved loss or trauma is marked by lapses in metacognitive monitoring" (Cassidy 63). However, people respond and adapt to loss in different ways; their response is based on the loss and the individuals themselves. The characters designation goes toward a positive direction. Jacob wants to build his own grand house. Rebekka wants to have a lovely family, with a husband and children. Lina wants to raise a lovely child as her own. Florens wants a lover who loves and takes care of her. Sorrow wants a healthy baby to make her be a mother.

However, Jacob's desire to build a bigger and bigger house makes him sick, and this causes him to die before the house's completion. He does not have the chance to enjoy his dream of a fancy house, and yet, he dies on his own land, in the rain, with his wife and female servants helping him. Before meeting Jacob, Rebekka desperately wants to leave her own family; her discomfort with her family made her

impatient to seek some kind of escape. Rebekka considered meeting Jacob as a good fortune; however, she eventually loses her husband and children, her source of happiness. Lina and Florens, who were abandoned by their parents, want to compensate their loss by having someone to love. For Lina, she finds, in Florens, someone who needs to be taken care of by her. For Florens, she wants a lover, the blacksmith, who loves only her. Unfortunately, their adherence to seek love ends in failure.

If we take a closer look at the cause of failures in details, the point here is whether the main characters recognize the motherhood. Jacob and Rebekka attached to their obsession without remembering motherhood. However, Despite the many sorrows and failures that the other three female characters encountered in their lives, they continued to persevere and stay strong. Lina, for example, chose to strengthen herself by compiling and employing the various healing practices that her mother had taught her before her mother's untimely death. Had Lina been older or tutored in healing long ago, she might have eased the pain of her family and all the others dying around her. she found a way to be in the world by "relying on memory and her own resources" (49). The shame and guilt of surviving the destruction of her families diminished with her promise to never deceive and leave behind people she loved. Indeed, Lina was "steady, unmoved by any catastrophe as though she has seen and survived everything" (100).

Florens' experiences of sisterhood were the first steps to realizing true mercy. When Rebekka sent her to the blacksmith with an errand, she was exhausted, and so she knocked at Widow Ealing's door for help. At Widow Ealing's place, some visitors saw Florens, and they said, "she is Afric, the Black man is among us," (111) and they treated Florens as if she were a demon; the visitors made Florens "take off her clothes and check her teeth and even tongue without touching to inspect" (112).

Jane, Widow Ealing's daughter, helped Florens to flee. Jane boiled duck eggs and wrapped them in a cloth. She folded a blanket and handed it to Florens. Then they

ran through the pasture with Jane leading the way. For her kindness, Florens thanked Jane, but Jane said, "no thank you" (114) and kissed Florens' forehead. When Florens returned home after being abandoned by the blacksmith, "she looks proud, rather than a wounded, barefoot and bloody woman" (149). Memories of being beloved by someone made Florens rise up again and be stronger than before, even though she was abandoned by her lover.

While Sorrow was giving birth to her child, Willard and Scully, her neighbors, heard her moans and helped her. Their purpose was confined to the survival of the newborn girl. And although Sorrow had been saved by many men, the Captain, the sawyer's sons, Jacob, and now Willard and Scully, she was convinced that with her healthy child's birth, she had done something important by herself. The memory of her baby's first yawn took away Sorrow's pains, and caring and nursing her child made Sorrow stronger than before that she gradually became a true mother for her baby.

Indeed, the main characters of *A Mercy* are women of incredible inner strength. Whatever life throws at them, whatever obstacles they face, they shape the circumstances to their advantage, and they trust in the power of their own imaginations. They dare death. They refuse random meaninglessness. They fight against the threats of men. For them, the only way to overcome traumatic memories of their early years is discovering and renewing the bonds of motherhood. The memories of a mother's teachings, the love one finds among sisters and mother's love of protecting her baby are the true mercies that save their lives so they may live for themselves. C. Fred Alford uses Klein's words to explain. "What reason is there to assume that what is available in intimate relationships, such as care, concern, understanding, and love, is automatically "in principle" to overcome maternal separation experienced in childhood" (Alford 29). Lina, Sorrow and Florens experience those feelings based on motherhood. Those feelings provide a clue to their healing for them.

V. Conclusion

Andrea O'Reilly states that Morrison defines motherhood as "fundamentally and profoundly an act of resistance, essential and integral to black women's fight against racism and their ability to achieve well-being for themselves and their culture. The power of motherhood and the empowerment of mothering are what make possible the better world we seek for ourselves and for our children" (2). As Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber mentions in her work, as in Morrison's previous novels, "the characters in *A Mercy* are displaced from home, orphaned, and abandoned like others and remains scarred by American Culture. Cultural re-creation of slave trauma indicates the deficiency of the white mirror for black desire perpetuates the black struggle for subjectivity" (27, 138). However, "the helplessness which is resulting from both communal and personal trauma overwhelms the characters" (Schreiber 138). The characters in *A Mercy* bring back the memory of motherhood to create a deeper understanding of themselves.

In *A Mercy*, Morrison sets the story in the 1690s, in which the foundations of racial slavery were being laid. Morrison goes back to the beginning of slavery in America. At that time women were exposed to imminent risks, and to be without the protection of men meant that "independent women were suspected of being witches and paternalism between men and women was still the norm" (Downie 56). In *A Mercy*, Morrison would like to express this message: for the female characters in *A Mercy*, what makes them rise again from adversaries is not from a husband, children, a big house or lovers, but from acknowledging the strength of motherhood and sisterhood. Even though they want to have the substitutes to compensate their losses, such as the loss of a mother's love or the loss of familial connections, those substitutes do not work properly. Eventually, the truest mercy is shown when characters come to have the power to overcome their struggles when Lina recalls her mother's messages in her childhood, when Sorrow understands the true meaning of motherhood as she tries to protect her own baby, and when Florens finally realizes

her mother's true love, that sending Florens to Jacob was an act of mercy, a way to save Florens from the cruelty of slavery. With these realizations, they are stronger than before and as they rise up again, they can overcome the threats of the world at last.

The profound changes in these characters' lives are depicted through the perspectives of Willard and Scully and by Florens' own accounts at the end of the story. Sorrow has improved because "she was less addle-brained, more capable of handling chores and her baby was always the first" (146). Sometimes Sorrow refuses others' help because she trusts only herself. Because of her baby, Sorrow has developed a quick and knowing sense of purpose. At the beginning of the story, Florens could have been an easy prey for men. Men would easily recognize Florens' vulnerability, her tendency to please others, and most importantly, her readiness to blame herself for others' wrongdoing. However, clearly, that is no longer true upon looking at her now. She has become untouchable.

At the novel's conclusion, the story returns to Florens who thinks about the episode with the blacksmith; she talks to him as if he were with her. In her narrative, Florens reveals what happened at the blacksmith's cottage, and how she found out why her mother abandoned her when she was given to Jacob. Through her hard life, Florens understands that her mother cannot protect Florens from cruel men and slavery even though "Florens cannot know what her mother is telling her and her mother cannot know what Florens is wanting to tell her" (161). To be a female slave in the Jublio plantation is like an open wound that cannot be healed. Florens' mother noticed that Jacob saw Florens as a human child, and "she says that when Jacob said 'yes', it was not a miracle bestowed by God. It was a mercy offered by a human" (167). Florens' mother thought that only Jacob's mercy could save her daughter from the hands of the cruel Portuguese slave owner.

However, what truly saves Florens was the realization of her mother's true love for her. Her mother's love was the truest mercy, and it was the true source of healing for Florens, healing that neither Jacob nor the blacksmith could give.

Likewise, for the other women in *A Mercy*, their traumatic memories of being abandoned were healed by remembering the deep bonds of motherhood

Morrison's *A Mercy* expands on her thoughts and feelings about the significance of home, security, and identity; these were the central themes that were featured in Morrison's 2006 Louvre exhibition, "The Foreigner's Home" (Schreiber 163). *A Mercy* also affirms that "beneath the physical manifestation of slavery is the ambivalent and disturbing story of a mother [...] abandonment in its core" (163). Thus, *A Mercy* delves deeper into "the psychic scars of ownership" while it seeks "for a positive reflection in an evolving American culture" (Schreiber 163).

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Kim, Hwa-Jeong (Chonbuk National University/Instructor)

Address: (54896) Dept. of English Language & Literature, College of Humanities, Chonbuk National University, 567 Baekje-daero, Jeonju, Korea

Email: gracehj0815@daum.net

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