



Journal Homepage: -www.journalijar.com

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH (IJAR)

Article DOI:10.21474/IJAR01/13113
DOI URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21474/IJAR01/13113>



RESEARCH ARTICLE

SOCIETAL INCARCERATION OF THE MARGINALISED : AN ANALYSIS OF TONI MORRISON'S A MERCY

Syed Kouser Jabeen

Research Scholar, Department of English, Maulana Azad National Urdu University, Hyderabad.

Manuscript Info

Manuscript History

Received: 29 April 2021
Final Accepted: 30 May 2021
Published: June 2021

Key words:-

Marginalised, Subaltern, Toni Morrison,
Incarceration, Society, Women,
Psychological Impositions

Abstract

Incarceration pertains to the limitations imposed upon a particular person. Social imprisonment on the other hand does not require a particular place in order to confine an individual or a group of people. Their conformity then turns out to become an injected-hobby. This study intends to explore the paths which Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison highlighted in her era, because they contain an impressive contemporariness. The social incarceration of the marginalised lot, particularly the subaltern among them has been her major arcana. Through a keen examination of the novel *A Mercy*, the paper attempts to put forward the contemporary relevance of the issues addressed. The practice of slave-trade was a visible imprisonment of the marginalised, while the current society dealing with the aphasia of neo-colonialism is in itself an extended form of indirect detention. Slave trade acted as a synonym for flesh trade in relation to the marginalised women who have thus been troubled by double-incarceration. Psychoanalysis has been used as a scale of measurement in order to trace the inner captivities of the victims. It is apprehensible that Toni Morrison as a writer justified her position of being an ambassador of the marginalised women while possessing important concurrent connotations. The study provides an insightful glimpse into the hidden beastliness of the contemporary incarceration. Be it direct or indirect suppression, visible or invisible restraints, the current is the ugliest growth of a tumour. Thus, the deadly foreordination of the conceptualisations present in her texts have turned out to become a realistic modern day practice.

Copy Right, IJAR, 2021.. All rights reserved.

Introduction:-

Toni Morrison as a person does not require any prefatory lead. She has been widely acclaimed for the artifacts she manufactured through her writing. Her books have been an eye-opening phenomenon. Therefore, received the well-deserved and unmitigated recognition of the times ceaseless in nature.

Morten Hansen in her article 'I Am Become Wilderness: Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* and Global American Space' 2018, talks mainly about the year 2008 in which the novel was published. It is in this year that the United States of America elected its first black president. A year in which African-Americans got their own representation; be it the Morrison's renowned writing or the political one for that matter. She further describes the two generations to be uncommunicating in nature. Neither of them is in a condition to understand the intentions of the other. Further

Corresponding Author:-Syed Kouser Jabeen.

Address:-Department of English, Maulana Azad National Urdu University, Hyderabad.

Morrison's work is regarded as having no limitations in terms of space, for it reaches beyond America. Mercy is considered as a source of mediation between the making of aesthetic and political world. The ruthless wide expansion of the colonial racial economy has been held responsible for the miseries. The only thing that comes to the rescue of the oppressed characters is the wilderness instead of humans, it provides them with a platform to give vent to their inner feelings.

Marjorie Downie in her review 'Of Orphans and Mercy: A Review of A Mercy by Toni Morrison' 2009, writes about the novel being set in an era where relationships without a man were considered abnormal and bewitching in nature and its connectivity with the impending rejection and dispossession. Narrating the story of all the slave orphans in the novel, it projects their yearning for attaining completion. It also talks about the nature of miseries which tend to harden the women characters. It also states that there is this continuous overlapping of roles between men and women.

Jennifer Terry in her article '“Breathing the Air of a World So New”: Rewriting the Landscape of America in Toni Morrison's A Mercy' 2014, talks about the imagination of the author to remap the landscapes. Morrison's work is thus regarded as a narrative against colonial period and the disaster of slavery it brought. A link towards ecocriticism has also been formed, marked by disempowerment and chaos which results into the exploration of the relationships between man and environment. The novel reflects the denial that African-Americans had to deal with, and on the other hand it projects the new settlers to be insatiable and wild. It also predicts the racism to be an integral part of America now, which can lead to more pessimism.

Yuan Wang in his article 'Morrison's Black Feminist Discourse in A Mercy' 2015, talks about the novel being challenging in nature, particularly it challenges the conventional regulations imposed upon African-American women. It states that Morrison's dominant theme has been tracing the history of African-Americans. While defining Morrison's Black Feminist perspective, it highlights the fact that black female lost their place in history when the construction of official documents of America was in process. It's this lost identity that needs to be regained. It also states that the novel has a language that provides voice to the voiceless.

Maxine L. Montgomery in his article 'Got on My Travelling Shoes: Migration, Exile, and Home in Toni Morrison's A Mercy' 2011, talks about the ever-shifting identities of African-Americans. It emphasises upon the rethinking of colonial regulations and impositions. The diverse perspectives of motherhood present in novel have also been explored in terms of understanding between some of the characters related to humans as well as the land they inhabit, which then tends to complicate the reading of American history. Being neglected from generations, many characters have been regarded as borderline.

Tyrannical sufferings of the marginalised have been witnessed regardless of time and age. Women of the marginalised sections have suffered even more. These women suffer at the hands of their oppressors first and with an exaggerated brutality made to face miseries by the men of their own clan too. Therefore, being doubly marginalised these women are forcibly deprived of reasoning power. They accept their conditions as they are and start doubting their own capabilities as humans. 'A Mercy' begins with Florens: a sufferer, narrating the important episodes of her traumatic journey. A journey that carved her livelihood into a misery. A journey that represents the hollow-self of women who surround her. It becomes evident when we read the following text: "Don't be afraid. My telling can't hurt you in spite of what I have done and I promise to lie quietly in the dark-Weeping perhaps or occasionally seeing the blood once more..." (Morrison 4). Her self-talking is reflective of her psychological condition; unable to trust anyone to complain about the atrocities, she prefers resolving the chaos herself. Marginalised men are engrained with hatred towards their own women because their minds are trained to believe the oppressors-truth. This oppressors truth-narrative is the foundational factor for the imprisonment of marginalised. Quarantined in a larger society is an intentional backlash against mental as well as physical developments. Even in contemporary scenario what people lack is honest and genuine emotional support. 'The Bluest Eye' by Toni Morrison is a chaotical representation of a deadening reality and 'A Mercy' portrays an important similarity of miseries with contemporary relevance. In order to bring to the forefront the psychological aspects of the down-trodden Morrison has achieved success worth acknowledgment. A Mercy dealing with the phase of Slave-trade and the associated brutalities in the then America, provides a completely fractured image of a society that regarded itself as civilised but had authoritarian characteristics. A deliberate attempt to dishonour is what leads to an absolute manipulation of the mindset. The text provides an important observation regarding slavery which once accepted psychologically becomes an indispensable component of the oppression. Black men faced racial discrimination

because they conformed to the notion of inferior-race and black women dealt with immensely negative consequences because they attracted attention. Nothing much has changed in the present scenario as well. Slavery is still in practice with a slightly different approach on the part of the master. Men are obsessed with body-building rather than future-building and women want a slim-trim figure by starving themselves which is believed to have positive life prospects. Even a slight thought of who is benefited behind the scenes is hardly taken into consideration. Multi-millionaire companies are demeaning the humane perspective of the humans but the fact still remains unconsidered at the ground level. Common masses are made to play puppets and zombies; who leave lives somewhere behind in the hazardous contest of attaining power-positions.

Morrison while highlighting the atrocities of the marginalised provided a genuine insight as a writer with several first hand experiences. The treatment of Blacks, even their being recognised and labelled as Negroes was a deliberate assault on humanity. Life was intentionally made difficult for them with umpteen novel and foreign settlements. The text reshuffles the pages of history while revisiting the time when people were made to accept incarceration. The text appears to become the actual representation of the time. It was the time when each and every step of the victims was guided by the oppressors policy. It highlights the factual finding that it is the inequality in relation to basic necessities that brings forth poverty, which being a deliberate attempt trigger the feelings of futility among the victims. There is anger and dissatisfaction; which in actuality is a behavioural acceptance of suppression. A society that doesn't provide enough opportunity to categorise things and events as legitimate or illegitimate, obviously contains low developmental prospects for the marginalised sects. Hegemony and oppression although equivalent to power knowledge and a widely recognised discourse is still trending, rendering intellectuals to nothing more than the muted-spectators. It has always been a deliberate political propaganda to create and maintain differences in order to benefit the select few. One can understand the condition of the marginalised women when not even the high class women were provided recognition as logical beings. The following excerpt from the text proves it: "D'Ortega's wife was a chattering magpie, asking point-less questions-How do you manage living in snow?-and making sense-defying observations, as though her political judgement were equal to a man's"(Morrison 20). Marginalised women were merely reserved for biological pleasures. Either for marriage or illicit relations, they were forced to submit themselves in-front of their masters. There isn't a single instance present in the text where a man is projected consummating out of love and concern. This highlights the devaluation of human relations, that poverty transmits among people as retribution for being overwhelmingly submissive. In the text women have been pictured in search of upliftment which unfortunately cannot be found in any of the masculine characters. It seems that they let themselves to be exploited in search of true relations. There is a yearning for fulfilment that is suggested in following textual lines : "'I am your mother,'" she said. "My Name is complete"'(Morrison, 158).

Young women characters such as Pecola Breedlove have been since generations forcibly made to agree with the selected notions of beauty. One wonders who was the first person to generate in Pecola the quest for the bluest of eyes and who shall be the last. The ambiguous questions may not appear vague in real sense if the politicising of events did not exist. In her Nobel Prize acceptance speech Toni Morrison talked about 'language'; that may possess one interpretation as the 'language of oppression'; that language which has been taught since decades to spread and continue the disease of racism and affiliated negativities. The contagious-disease has no cure for the victims as long as it is serving the materialistic gains of the creators. Apartheid doesn't seem to be over, it is there in the minds of people who are still being deliberately neglected in terms of gaining opportunities. Everyday stories of hundreds of black African-Americans are worth anticipation. Morrison at times seems predicting future while performing a religious obligation of demonstrating right and wrong to people and in deconstructing the notion of American Dream she seems to have fulfilled all her duties. While narrating the stories of blacks and their generated hatred towards each other she successfully points out how division among the people of a community can provide outsiders an upper-hand to conquer and thereby practice a despotic-rule. History has witnessed the demonic consequentiality of Divide and Rule. The wisdom and practicality of the subordinated ones is based on the environment they are provided; which is undoubtedly an enclosed one for the survival of suppression and is very well evident in the text.

Morrison by providing an enlightened insight becomes a revolutionary writer who courageously dealt with the odds of a male dominated sphere. *A Mercy* depicts a realistic picture of white atrocities; the formation of slave-trade, degradation of black men and the intense exploitation of black female. The text is thought-provokingly interesting and points to the inner realities and the possessive hollowness prevalent among the victims. There is a feeling of loss conjecturing in Absurdism; making lives of victims the inheritance of nothingness. Female victims are in a Nihilistic state because of the religion that has been made controversial for them. A religion that does not cure, loses all its relevance. In *Mercy* religion supports the domination when victims are made to understand that the God is white.

Florens being an amalgamation of ruins, devoid of genuine feelings is left incurable and numb. The traumas of her early childhood and the miserable psychological state after rejections, results in expanding her hallucinations which highlights the intensity of tyranny that the teen has already suffered. What is more pathological in this case is that these atrocities were inflicted in abundance by blacks themselves, which rendered the brutality extremely dangerous. The following excerpt from 'Contested Boundaries' defines it well :

A Mercy figures the entrance into slavery as a parent's abandonment of a child and indirectly explores the involvement of Africans in the process of enslaving other Africans(Montgomery 15).

Highly suggestive of the tyrannical beginnings of slave trade, the text presents contemporary relevance as well. Society was deliberately acting as a prison for the downtrodden and it is still manipulated to continue the imprisonment of the marginalised. In order to continue the racism and the affiliated incarceration, media and television broadcasts serve as means. The minds have been colonised in such a way that people other than the victims do not want to question the liability. Authentication is hardly a responsibility of these broadcasts because the masters are the owners and every derogatory discourse against the marginalised is well manufactured and intentional in order to maintain and provide justifications for the negativities hurled upon them.

Rachel Lister in 2009 mentions in 'Reading Toni Morrison' that: "...she has suggested that this openness is not reflected in today's America, where social boundaries are becoming ever more fixed"(78).

The intensity of deliberate dehumanisation of the victims is reflected in the ways they were treated even after proving their loyalty for generations. They were intentionally made to accept that they belonged to nowhere. The existential crisis is one of the major reasons for self-destructing behavioural disorder found in the oppressed in present world as well as the textual manifestation. Although completely exploited in terms of bodily pleasures, women had no authority to treat themselves with delicacy. Roughness in contribution to toughness of colour was regarded as a demonic human figure. When one of the slave is up for sale, the poster inscription goes like this : "Hardly female, christianized and capable in all matters domestic available for exchange of goods or specie"(Morrison 61). Slave women could not believe that there was any one left among them who was not molested and raped. Although mothers intended to protect their daughters, which is reflected in what Florens's mother does in abandoning her, but her foreordained destructive fate couldn't be resisted. Spotting blacks was no less than spotting a beast and at times it was an amusement for upper-class to taunt and rebuke the slaves. It is evident in the text as : "I walk alone except for the eyes that join me on my journey. Eyes that do not recognize me, eyes that examine me for a tail, an extra teat, a man's whip between my legs. Wondering eyes that stare and decide if my navel is in the right place if my knees bend backward like the forelegs of a dog...tongue is split like a snake's or if my teeth are filling to points to chew them up..."(Morrison 135). This was the successfully practiced way of inculcating in slaves the feelings of worthlessness and morbidity. Slaves were treated harshly, beaten in-genuinely, and this treatment was considered normal by masters.

Morrison's writings brought a complete shift in Slave Narratives; these were counternarratives, which were writing back to centre. Yearning for empowerment and upliftment of her class, Morrison started a process of healing and undoubtedly left a legacy behind to be followed. To win acclamation among the harshest of critics is realistically a hard won battle. Morrisons going back to 1680's in 2008 is evident enough of the fact that the issues are still relevant. No matter what modernism claims, America is still partly savage for African-Americans and many other marginalised communities. It is hurling atrocities without any proper check of other powers. It has evolved into a terror-land rather than something fascinating that modernism could have claimed. Society has been driven towards a phase of intolerance, acting as detention camps and thereby created a scenario of imprisonment. This societal incarceration is far more dangerous than the prisons we normally think about. The actual condition of women is still under question mark, particularly the ones belonging to the marginalised sects. The invisible control over the activities of others, an upside down picture of reality are the consequences of neo-colonialism. It has handicapped almost all autonomous bodies and countries. All the wars are basically a deliberate infliction for materialistic gains which makes it important to mention that it is definitely savagery at its peak. Psychologically every human is effected due to this forcibly imposed materialistic marathonic-race. People are drained out of emotional connections and stressed. Caught by inaction towards finding time for betterment has heightened the psychological trauma and depression, which can also be depicted almost among all the characters of the novel *Mercy*. Men, women, white, Black, children, aged; all suffer from mental psychosis. There is this derision and threat walking side by side while enveloping the humanistic concerns. Therefore, Morrison provides a beautifully packed realistic picture of what the

world is heading towards; perhaps in competition to become a full-fledged detention centre for humans or may be towards lawlessness. Her projection of destruction is screaming to find solace in the lap of unadulterated nature; time suggests to make a unanimous call for 'return to natural synchronisation'.

Works Cited:-

1. Bosteels, Bruno. "THESES ON ANTAGONISM, HYBRIDITY, AND THE SUBALTERN IN LATIN AMERICA." *Dispositio*, vol. 25, no. 52, 2005, pp. 147–158. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/41491793. Accessed 8 Feb. 2020.
2. Downie, Marjorie. "Of Orphans and Mercy: A Review of A Mercy by Toni Morrison." *The College of The Bahamas Research Journal*, vol.15, 2009, pp. 56-58, <http://researchjournal.cob.edu.bs>. Accessed 4 sept.2020.
3. Hansen, Morten. "I Am Become Wilderness: Toni Morrison's A Mercy and Global American Space." *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, vol.29, no. 3, 2018, pp. 210-227, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10436928.2018.1490602>. Accessed 4 sept. 2020.
4. Harris, Trudier. "The Worlds That Toni Morrison Made." *The Georgia Review*, vol. 49, no. 1, 1995, pp. 324–330. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/41401646. Accessed 8 Feb. 2020.
5. Lang, Kanika, and Fenella Porter. "Resources on Working on Gender with Marginalised Peoples." *Gender and Development*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2006, pp. 291–305. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/20461143. Accessed 8 Feb. 2020.
6. Leysens, Anthony J. "Social Forces in Southern Africa: Transformation from below?" *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, vol. 44, no. 1, 2006, pp. 31–58. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3876100. Accessed 8 Feb. 2020.
7. Lister, Rachel. "Reading Toni Morrison". Greenwood pub,2009.
8. "Marginalisation, Memory and Monuments." *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 46, no. 44/45, 2011, pp. 7–8. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/23047375. Accessed 8 Feb. 2020.
9. Montgomery, L. Maxine. "Contested Boundaries : New critical essays on the fiction of ToniMorrison". Cambridge,2013.
10. Montgomery, L. Maxine. "Got on My Travelling Shoes: Migration, Exile, and Home in Toni Morrison's A Mercy." *Journal of Black Studies*. Vol. 42, no. 4, 2011, pp. 627-637, jbs.sagepub.com. Accessed 4 sept. 2020.
11. Moore, Geneva Cobb. "A Demonic Parody: Toni Morrison's 'A Mercy.'" *The Southern Literary Journal*, vol. 44, no. 1, 2011, pp. 1–18. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/23208766. Accessed 8 Feb. 2020.
12. Morrison, Toni. "A Mercy". Vintage, 2008.
13. Peterson, Nancy J. "INTRODUCTION: CANONIZING TONI MORRISON." *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 39, no. 3/4, 1993, pp. 461–479. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/26283459. Accessed 8 Feb. 2020.
14. Roynon, Tessa. "Her Dark Materials: John Milton, Toni Morrison, and Concepts of 'Dominion' in 'A Mercy.'" *African American Review*, vol. 44, no. 4, 2011, pp. 593–606. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/23316244. Accessed 8 Feb. 2020.
15. Tally, Justine. "The Cambridge companion to Toni Morrison". Cambridge,2007.
16. Terry, Jennifer. "Breathing the Air of a World So New: Rewriting the Landscape of America in Toni Morrison's A Mercy." *Journal of American Studies*. Vol. 48, no. 1, 2014, pp. 127-145, <http://journals.Cambridge.org/abstract/S0021875813000686>. Accessed 4 sept. 2020.
17. Wang, Yuan. "Morrison's Black Feminist Discourse in A Mercy." *Open Journal of Social Sciences*. Vol. 3, 2015, pp. 234-238, [10.4236/jss.2015.311028](https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2015.311028). Accessed 4 sept. 2020.