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ALTERNATIVE LITERARY HISTORIES: TONI MORRISON'S *A MERCY* AND COLONIAL NORTH AMERICA

Abstract. The paper offers a reading of Toni Morrison's 2008 novel *A Mercy* as an alternative history of colonial North America focused on empowering the powerless and giving a voice to those silenced and overlooked in mainstream histories. The theoretical framework is based on Hayden White's idea of history as inevitably imbued with fictionalized elements, Homi Bhabha's interpretation and Morrison's idea of 'rememory' and the black feminist idea of acquiring one's own voice by becoming the speaking subject. The main thesis is that Morrison's book offers an alternative version of early American history by giving voices to the representatives of various minority groups from the colonial period of North America: white immigrant, African American, mixed-race and Native American women and indentured servants. Using multiple narrators, Morrison not only manages to complement 'official' history books but also to use individual narrators as symbols of the collective experiences of their respective groups.

Keywords: American literature, alternative history, Toni Morrison, rememory, colonial America, historical fiction.

1. Introduction

If one ventures to take a closer look at literature dealing with the colonial period of British North America, both fact and fiction, everything seems rather straightforward and monolithic: a story of exploration, conquest, progress and development with occasional conflicts with the natives. In truth, the majority of mainstream books about this period were written from the perspective of a white, Protestant, Anglo-Saxon male, and the narratives reflect that. However, what about those who also took part in the early history of America but were not part of this majority group?

This paper is about a novel that imaginatively deals with the early period of American history from the perspectives of underprivileged groups. Morrison's 2008 novel, *A Mercy*, is written in the mode directly opposite to the majority of historical and fictional accounts of the colonial period. It represents a mosaic of personal histories of various members of early colonial society. What they all have in common is that they are marginalized in one way or another, with regard to their gender, race, religion, socio-economic status or ethnic origin.

The keyword is 'rememory', a term coined by Morrison, a recreation of popular memory through imagined accounts that reflect the experiences of real people and

their respective groups. By giving voices to the members of oppressed groups, Morrison effectively manages to write a literary history that may complement history books and contribute to a better understanding of this period in history, or rather, of actual experiences of people who lived then and there.

2. African American History and Fiction

Morrison's novel can be analyzed as belonging to two major groups of literature: historical fiction and African American literature. When it comes to literary histories, one of the key issues that needs to be addressed is the relationship between historical fiction and history books. While we normally start from the premise that history corresponds to truth and facts, a novel by proxy corresponds to fiction or some imagined artistic truth. However, this issue is further complicated by Hayden White's (1978, p. 106) considerations of history writing and his claim that a "historian like any writer of a prose discourse fashions his materials". In other words, history is also a sort of a narrative from a particular perspective, highlighting certain facts and leaving out others. Therefore, it need not necessarily follow that historical discourse is a mirror image of reality. White's work was crucial in the argument against the supremacy of history in terms of truthfulness when compared to literature. He challenged this view by giving a structuralist overview of the most common tropes in historical narratives. White's view did not remain uncontested but is still very influential in all discussions of the relationship between history and literature. A similar view is expressed by Linda Hutcheon (2004, p. 93) who coined the term historiographic metafiction which, by definition, "refutes the view that only history has a truth claim" and asserts that "both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs". The novel in question can also be viewed within the context of historiographic metafiction in regard to its revisionist endeavors to refocus "on previously neglected or silenced objects of study such as women, homosexuals and racial minorities." (López Roperó, 1999, p. 173).

Another important dimension of Morrison's work is the fact that it represents one of the most shining examples of African American literature. One of the tasks of the Black Arts Movement, according to the author of its 1968 manifesto, Larry Neal, is to create a new history, new myths, symbols and legends, i.e., find new ways of expressing what he terms new truths. Neal (1994) argues that black artists should tell the truths of the oppressed not of the oppressors and that black arts should combine ethics with aesthetics. This is an echo of DuBois' (1994) view expressed much earlier, in his 1926 essay "Criteria of Negro Art", in which he invited African American artists to use their art at the service of their political struggle. A combination of aesthetic concerns with the political agenda, therefore, has been a characteristic of African American art for a long time. Finding and articulating one's own voice is also deemed to be the "most central trope" of the African American tradition in literature, as it is considered to be instrumental in liberating the subject (Gates, 1988, p. 239). Self-definition is a major step in the process of de-victimization and this process

often includes finding a voice and speaking out in the oral and written traditions of African American women (Collins, 2002, pp. 97-121). Or, as Toni Morrison (1992, p. 90) stated in her critical study *Playing in the Dark*: “My project is an effort to avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers; from the serving to the served.”

In his discussion of African American art, Homi Bhabha singles out Harlem Renaissance writers such as Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes who “asserted their cultural tradition to retrieve their repressed histories.” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 13) On the other hand, contemporary black writers like Toni Morrison recreate memorial spaces to relate “the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence.” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 15). Bhabha (1994, p. 284) draws on the term “rememory” coined by Morrison and explains it as:

“The act of ‘rememoration’ (her concept of the recreation of popular memory) turns the present of narrative enunciation into the haunting memorial of what has been excluded, excised, evicted, and for that very reason becomes the *unheimlich* space for the negotiation of identity and history”.

In other words, Morrison’s concern is to provide a voice for the oppressed who have been overlooked and erased from official histories and literary canons. She makes new memories, new literary histories in lieu of the old ones written from the perspective of the dominant group. This process is described as a literary “invasion” of “the house of art and fiction” with the purpose of “alarming and dispossessing” to create new truths and to recapture and decolonize the artistic space (Bhabha, 1994, p. 26).

A similar view was expressed by the Nobel Committee (NobelPrize.org, 1993) when they awarded the 1993 Nobel Prize in Literature to Toni Morrison, “who in novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import, gives life to an essential aspect of American reality.” Furthermore, the Committee stated that her novels had “given the Afro–American people their history back, piece by piece” (Ekelund, 2006, p. 138.) Morrison (1995, p. 91) herself described her job as an African American woman writer “to rip that veil drawn over ‘proceedings too terrible to relate’”. Or, as she stated in one of her renowned lectures: “Writing is, *after* all, an act of language, its practice. But *first* of all it is an effort of the will to discover” (Morrison, 1994, p. 146). Furthermore, she points out that recollections (her own and those of others) are instrumental in this process that she terms “literary archaeology (Morrison, 1995, p. 91). The key term here is *memory* which constitutes the recollections that in turn constitute the artistic truth. In her process of seeking for the truth, Morrison (1995, p. 93) points out that: “the crucial distinction for me is not the difference between fact and fiction, but the distinction between fact and truth.” She then goes on to highlight the inextricable connection between memory and the act of imagination, recognizing writers as “the most probing of artists” when it comes to uncovering the truth (Morrison, 1992, p. 9). This is, in fact, an echo of Aristotle’s (350 B.C.E.) view of poetry in his *Poetics*: “Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular.”

The recovery of African American history includes a painful process of facing past traumas instead of evading them, to start “the healing process for the characters, the reader and the author” (Krumholz, 1992, p. 395). Evasion, as a particularly harmful strategy of dealing with both factual and artistic truth, is also identified by Morrison (1992, p. 9) as one of the key features of American literature touching upon the issues of race. Therefore, her writing can be considered an intellectual (and political) effort to provide “an alternative vision of the world and reality that challenges the codification and authority of accepted or standard history” (Ying, 2006, p. 13). In other words, Morrison’s fiction aims to provide the missing pieces of the puzzle of American literary history while at the same time serving as a vehicle for healing the traumas of African American past. The fact that the history of African American slavery is filled with silences and omissions, in the sense that the truths of the enslaved often remained untold, somewhat ironically provides fruitful soil for the writer of fiction who is able to employ imagination combined with collective memory to create new narratives. This process is an opportunity to rectify, retell and reconsider the history of both individuals and the collective and to draw attention to those traumas that remained hidden and undealt with. The obliqueness of literary language also represents a convenient mode of expression as it makes telling some particularly painful experiences easier in a manner that is sometimes fragmented or deeply personal (Krumholz, 1992, p. 406). The novel *A Mercy* is an excellent example of this literary practice of employing disjointed narrative to tell the story of personal and collective suffering.

3. *A Mercy* and American Colonial History

Early American history and the encounters of the Old and New Worlds are often connected to the mythical dimension of a “Paradise on Earth”, “a land of opportunity” and the idea of a new start, or “a clean slate” (Morrison, 1992, pp. 34-7). This romanticized view often leaves out the details pertaining to the plights of individuals, those who did not get a chance to realize their American Dreams. The stories of hardships and failures are usually conveniently overlooked in order to highlight the early commercial success of the new colonial society. What is more, both history books and literary accounts favor the perspective of the dominant group – white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant males, whereas all other pieces of the early American mosaic seem to be missing. Morrison’s 2008 novel *A Mercy* is a literary attempt to create an imaginative recollection that would include different perspectives and different voices of those who belonged to the minority groups in early British America because of their gender, religion, race, socio-economic status or ethnic origin. In other words, the novel tackles “the dominant narratives of the New World” (Terry, 2014, p. 131). Morrison describes the details that official history books do not: the hardships and a lack of opportunities for indentured servants, ecological disaster that the early establishment of colonies brought to the New World, individual experiences of those suspected of witchcraft, rape as an almost everyday part of many women’s

lives, and parents being forced to give up their children. Unlike chronological history books with categorized dates and events, Morrison's narrative is fragmented, told by narrators from multiple perspectives, and constantly moves back and forth in time as this is a necessary narrative technique to tell the artistic truth. Some critics describe this endeavor as Morrison's "war against an absence", an attempt to make decisions as a writer to create a fictional world that would include "a group of people never taken seriously by anybody – all those peripheral little girls" (Roye, 2012, p. 212).

The novel is set in early colonial Virginia and New York on the estate of Jacob Vaark, an Anglo-Dutch farmer and trader. Vaark's household consists of four women, two indentured servants and, occasionally, a free African American blacksmith. The story is narrated by Florens, a 16-year-old slave Vaark acquired several years ago in place of debt, Rebekka, his "pre-ordered" English wife, Lina, their capable and reliable Native American servant, Sorrow, a mentally unstable traumatized mixed-race foundling, Will and Scully, indentured to Vaark for 7 years and Jacob himself. None of the perspectives are privileged by Morrison but it is observable that Florens' story receives the most attention. The non-linear narrative reveals that Rebekka and Jacob's daughter died in a horse accident and that they had previously lost several male children. Florens was brought as a young child from a plantation in Maryland to help Rebekka recover. Vaark's luxurious mansion was built at the expense of cutting and burning massive amounts of native forest, and Jacob did not survive the smallpox epidemic which had decimated Lina's tribe. We also learn that the young colony was plagued by internal conflicts and rebellions, superstitions and witchcraft accusations. The pervading sense of overall insecurity, instability and personal misfortune is conveyed through the narratives of individual storytellers and their memories.

The underlying theme of abandonment is highlighted from the beginning of the novel when Florens recounts her memory of her mother whom she blames for abandoning her at a very early age. As the narrative progresses, it becomes clear that her mother was a slave and a victim of constant sexual abuse and that she gave her up because Jacob looked like a kind and sympathetic master who would not expose her daughter to the same traumas that she had to suffer. The fact that Florens does not realize this and mistakes her mother's sacrifice for a lack of love is an example of dramatic irony but also a literary strategy that mirrors the central intention of the narrative – that of unveiling hidden truths. Her mother's memory of the rape she suffered from the very first moment of her enslavement up to the day when she decided that it was better never to see her daughter again than to leave her at the mercy of her master is poignantly expressed as:

"To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below. Insults had been moving back and forth to and fro for many seasons between the king of we families and the king of others. I think men thrive on insults over cattle, women, water, crops." (Morrison, 2008, p. 161)

Through imagined conversations between a mother and a daughter, the 'mercy' from the title of the novel is revealed to have a bittersweet taste: on the one hand, the

act of abandonment *is* an act of mercy, on the other, the quality of mercy and its reach is limited. In a cruel world dominated by men, profit and a struggle for survival, even merciful acts towards women are interspersed with cruelty. The historical context of early North America with all its cruelties and insecurities provides an excellent setting for the story of individual human drama that reflects the collective experience of many women of African origin. Morrison merges history and imagination thus creating a rememory of both individual and collective experiences and traumas.

The rememory of Florens and her mother can also be interpreted in light of the black feminist idea of self-actualization through acquiring one's voice and becoming the speaking subject. An enslaved African American woman and her daughter become narrators and important factors in compiling the narrative which can be read as an alternative to the official history records. Instead of overlooking and silencing them, the novel makes these two characters and their testimonies central to the plot thus shifting the focus to those deprived of their human rights and making their voices heard.

Although Morrison presents an alternative version of history, she does not falsify it: the end of the novel reflects the ongoing pain and struggle of the enslaved women. Florens' life experience and unrequited love and passion for the Blacksmith turn her into a moody, cautious human being and she finally understands her mother's advice that she should harden up in order to survive in the cruel world to which she was condemned. Her final remark: "Mãe, you can have pleasure now because the soles of my feet are hard as cypress" (Morrison, 2008, p. 159), is a powerful metaphor for the years of slavery and abuse which African Americans managed to survive¹ and lived to tell the tale, as the proverb goes.

Morrison also includes a perspective of a free white woman in her narrative. Rebekka, Jacob's wife, travels to America on a ship carrying prostitutes and "pre-ordered" brides to the New World – a common practice to help settle and populate the early colonies. Pre-arranged marriages were a common practice during the era of colonization and a prospective groom would pay for the travel expenses of a prospective bride who in return had to produce proof of her virginity and intact morality. Rebekka's journey to the new world is retold exclusively from the perspectives of women. Unlike in history books, we find out that women were often forced to go to the new world, traveled in very difficult circumstances, were prey to sexual assaults and were very much aware of the fact that the promise of the new world for them contained little but suffering. Morrison again uses her strategy of rememorization to retell history from a different perspective and offer an alternative vision of colonial women's everyday realities.

Reading Rebekka's account of her colonial experiences, we realize that not even free white women were exempt from prejudice and discrimination. Very soon she realizes that "her prospects were servant, prostitute, wife, and although horrible stories were told about each of those careers, the last one seemed safest.

¹ This echoes the end of Willam Faulkner's novel *The Sound and the Fury*, another important piece of great American literature. In the end of the appendix that explains the background story of the Compsons' servants, the narrator states: "They endured." (Faulkner, 1994, p. 215)

The one where she might have children and therefore be guaranteed some affection.” (Morrison, 2008, p. 75) Her limited possibilities and lack of control over her life in the extremely harsh conditions of colonial Virginia reflect the experiences of many women who shared her circumstances. Thus, Rebekka, as a narrator, becomes a spokeswoman for the entire generation of white women who, although nominally belonged to the dominant group, did not enjoy the same rights and privileges as their male counterparts.

Her husband’s considerations of a good wife also reveal the predominant view of women. In his ad he stated that he was looking for “an unchurched woman of childbearing age, obedient but not groveling, literate but not proud, independent but nurturing. And he would accept no scold” (Morrison, 2008, p. 18). This short advertisement, based on the actual ones from the colonial era, sums up the general attitude towards women during this period: the value of a woman is assessed based on her biological function and her willingness to be obedient and silent in the public sphere which traditionally belonged to men. The deaths of her children and husband, and her own life-and-death struggle with smallpox turn her into an embittered woman who treats her servants cruelly and dismissively, thus internalizing white patriarchal behavioral patterns.

Rebekka’s recollections enable the readers to see what the lives of non-childbearing *femme soles* in colonial America looked like: hard and insecure with almost permanent suffering and without much chance of a change in circumstances for the better. The fact that Morrison combines Rebekka’s narrative with those of her servants is also a narrative strategy that ultimately renders the entire narrative more true and more all-encompassing than history books. This alternative view of history provides an original perspective and creates new truths by including different voices and giving them importance. What is more, it enables the readers to get a fuller picture of early colonial history and all the people who took part in the creation of America.

The novel also includes the perspectives of two more of Rebekka’s servants: Lina and Sorrow. Lina is a representative of Native Americans and their experience of early America. First taken from her native village decimated by smallpox by the Presbyterians, she finds herself in the service of Jacob Vaark disillusioned and deeply distrustful of white people and their manners. Her narrative is marked by her astute observation and understanding of other people’s behavior and although she is prone to superstition, somewhat paradoxically, her perspective seems the most rational one. She is very loyal to her masters because she realizes that their only chance of survival in the hostile colonial environment of Virginia is by serving a respectable white man. Lina’s comments on their state after Jacob’s death provide powerful testimony of a joint female experience of early America:

“Don’t die, Miss. Don’t. Herself, Sorrow, a newborn and maybe Florens—three unmastered women and an infant out here, alone, belonging to no one, became wild game for anyone. None of them could inherit; none was attached to a church or recorded in its books. Female and illegal, they would be interlopers, squatters, if

they stayed on after Mistress died, subject to purchase, hire, assault, abduction, exile.” (Morrison, 2008, p. 56)

The keyword here is “unmastered” as it reveals that the key criterion for the definition of a woman’s status is a man. Ironically, unmastered, although it may seem like a desirable option from a present-day perspective, in colonial America was equal to “fair game” for anyone. Unmastered in this context means without protection as men were the only ones with the rights to own property, slaves or hire servants. Thus, somewhat ironically, the death of their master means the continuance of insecurity and suffering in the New World for these women.

By giving voice to a subservient Native American woman, Morrison also complements official history books and recreates popular memory by introducing details of the Native American experience from their own perspective. Lina’s first experiences of white people as treacherous and violent disease carriers or hypocritical religious fanatics reflect the experiences of her Native American peers. She is also the only one who observes the ecological disaster brought on by white men: “Killing trees in that number, without asking their permission, of course his efforts would stir up misfortune” (Morrison, 2008, p. 42). She uses her faith based on nature, spirits and superstition to correctly predict the ill fate of the Vaark family and their master’s efforts to transform nature. Her explanation for the deaths of Vaark children and the ultimate death of Jacob Vaark can be interpreted as a verdict on white man’s hubris and his abuse of natural resources as well as the natives of the continent. At one point, she recalls the words of the old sachem of her tribe:

“They would come with languages that sounded like dog bark; with a childish hunger for animal fur. They would forever fence land, ship whole trees to faraway countries, take any woman for quick pleasure, ruin soil, befoul sacred places and worship a dull, unimaginative god. They let their hogs browse the ocean shore turning it into dunes of sand where nothing green can ever grow again. Cut loose from the earth’s soul, they insisted on purchase of its soil, and like all orphans they were insatiable. It was their destiny to chew up the world and spit out a horribleness that would destroy all primary peoples.” (Morrison, 2008, p. 52)

Morrison not only gives voice to Lina but also, through her, makes a rememory of generations of Native Americans who did not find their place in official history records and books. Significantly, Lina does not fully share old sachem’s beliefs – she is aware that there are decent white people who use resources rationally and transform the continent for the better. She admires the way her master organizes his farm and his compassion for a foundling, named Sorrow, although her practices and beliefs are different.

Sorrow, the character with the most powerful symbolic potential in her name, is a mixed-race victim of rape and abuse whom Jacob Vaark had brought home as a consolation for his wife who was in mourning for their dead child. Sorrow never speaks, her behavior resembles that of an intellectually impaired child, but the narrative reveals her thoughts and her perspective as well. Starting from the fact that no one knows her name or her past, and her overall misfortune from the rape to the

loss of her child (it is implied that Lina killed it), Sorrow is the character most strongly fixed in a position of inferiority. Her wonder at the people who complain about their hardships is summed up as: “I don’t understand why they are sad. Everyone has to work” (Morrison, 2008, p. 38). This sentence is a testimony of an early colonial experience when everyone had to invest their utmost efforts in order to survive. And not only that: suffering was a quintessential part of the experience, it was implied from the start and any complaining was futile. Furthermore, Sorrow’s inability to see any other option but work is a powerful rememory of generations of those who found themselves among minority groups in early America: their fate was sealed and unequivocal from the beginning and there was nothing they could do about it. Sorrow’s narrative is also important in the sense that it brings to the foreground the long history of rape and sexual abuse that started in the earliest days of colonial history and affected generations of women, a fact often overlooked in history books. By telling Sorrow’s story, Morrison speaks for those silenced and abused women and rectifies the injustice in popular memory.

4. Conclusion

Traumatic experiences and testimonies of female characters, their rememories and recreated recollections provide a broader insight into the history of colonial America and all people who participated in the literal and literary creation of the New World. It turns out that the multitude of voices tells a different story from the dominant narrative: a story of loneliness, struggle, abandonment and hope shared by all. Although a fictional account, this book helps us understand the colonial world in all its cruelty and complexity produced by socio-economic, cultural and historical circumstances. It begins with a memory of rejection and ends with an imagined rememory of love and acceptance. What is more, Morrison’s novel complements history books and early American literature joining the modernist style and the African American struggle for a distinctive identity, along with the efforts and plights of other minority group members.

The power of Morrison’s novel lies in the fact that it can be read both as an imagined account of early America – with the focus on its artistic merits, as well as a political statement against racism, sexism and many other forms of discrimination and injustice. Her postmodern narrative strategy is directed at both retrieving hidden memories, histories and truths and placing those who were historically in inferior social positions in the limelight. By giving voices to those characters, Morrison renders their stories important for American history and culture and enables the readers to form their own opinions, truths and interpretations based on multiple sources. This creates an impression that historical injustices can be corrected, at least partially, which is a quality that only (great) literature has to offer.

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KNJIŽEVNOST KAO ALTERNATIVA ISTORIJI: *MILOSRĐE* TONI MORISON I KOLONIJALNA SEVERNA AMERIKA

Rezime

Rad nudi čitanje romana *Milosrđe* Toni Morison iz 2008. godine kao alternativne istorije kolonijalne Severne Amerike u kojoj se potencira osnaživanje onih koji nisu bili na pozicijama moći i davanje glasa onima koji su u zvaničnim istorijama učutkivani i previđani. Teorijski okvir zasniva se na ideji Hejdene Vajta da istorija i sama sadrži elemente fikcije, kovanici 'rememorija' koju je smislila Toni Morison i interpretaciji te ideje Homi Babe, kao i na ideji Crnog feminizma da je neophodno da pojedinac progovori sopstvenim glasom kako bi postigao status subjekta. Polazimo od pretpostavke da roman Toni Morison predstavlja alternativnu verziju rane američke istorije u kojoj su naratori predstavnici različitih manjinskih grupa: imigranti, Afroamerikanci, američki starosedeooci, ljudi mešanog rasnog porekla, žene i najamni radnici. Koristeći različite perspektive, roman Toni Morison ne samo da dopunjuje zvaničnu istoriju već pojedinačni naratori postaju i simboli kolektivnih iskustava svojih manjinskih grupa.

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