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Liminal Space and Identity Crisis: Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*

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Abstract

The paper brings forth reconstruction and redefinition of black women's identity in Toni Morrison's A Mercy in the light of Homi K. Bhabha's post-colonial theories. Morrison, an Afro-American novelist, in almost all her narratives has challenged racial discrimination and exposed the misconceptions popularized regarding black people by white society and its internalization in black community. She reshapes the history of slavery through the memory of past and redefines black women's identity in white American society from Afro-American's standpoint. Morrison's employment of postmodernist narrative technique is apt to expose and challenge the white racial domination. The socio-cultural condition of doubly colonized black women is the cause of their traumas and distress even today. In her novels, Morrison depicts individual and community, conception of 'home' and liberates her characters to construct and reconstruct their identity. The paper endeavours to analyze Homi K. Bhabha's notions of 'unhomeliness', 'in-between space' and 'hybrid identity' of un-homely individuals. It will also explore the extent to which Bhabha's ideas are applicable on Morrison's A Mercy and would gather the findings.

Key Words: *Un-homeliness, Identity crisis, Ambivalence, Post-modernist narration.*

Postcolonial writers from the last four decades are engaged in violating the authority of sign system by exhibiting the worthlessness of its

claim that there is presence of absolute truth in the realist novel of nineteenth century in the west. Following crucial notion of deconstruction destabilization of the meta-narratives is introduced and homogenization of the colonizer as 'subject' and colonized as 'object' is challenged. Idealized image of unity and coherence in the received tradition is replaced by hybridity and ambivalence. Cultural collapses, loss of values and identity crisis have become significant subject matter of writing. Morrison has also challenged established realism in nineteenth century fiction writing like her contemporary writers of post-colonial world. She has employed postmodernist narrative technique to expose and challenge the white racial domination. She brings into being multiple voices through her narrative structure. In the novel *A Mercy* she has well represented the point of view of all the major racial categories in the New World like African, Native American, Anglo and Mulatto.

The fictional characters of black literary world are reflection of the society and Morrison has proven time and again that the reality exhibited in the realist texts of 19th century by white writers is not universal truth. In her novel characters are involved in search of their identity within the troubled context of his or her relationship to community. She deals with the questions like where a character's original 'home' is what ancestral roots are and how such origin formulates character and personality. In *A Mercy* she has created discourse on strategic hegemonic practices. Portrayal of the ambivalent situation and traumatic experiences in the masculinized world of the main character Florence who is a black girl caught in an ambivalent situation. She is deprived of her identity as being a black in the white society and is rejected and treated as a property by black community as well. She realizes that she is in space of in-betweenness and in terms of Homi K. Bhabha this sense of ambivalence or in-betweenness is 'un-homeliness'. Bhabha's notion of language is shaped from deconstruction, psychoanalysis and Michel Foucault. He describes the colonized and colonizer world as hybrid. He questions the concept of fixed identity which is imposed on the conquered nations by conquering powers and proposes that the hybrid identity of the colonized nations is constructed in a space of 'in-betweenness' and liminality. He calls this liminal space between the two worlds or cultures of the colonizer and colonized as "the Third space of enunciation" (Bhabha 54). Bhabha crosses physical border to the imaginative borders and the hybridization of binaries are more creative and at the same time it is malleable. Colonial subject encounters two different worlds: one of the colonizers and other of the colonized. He is caught between two clashing cultures and none of them is like his home and he feels un-homely. Bhabha proposes history and tradition with the memory of past to reconstruct the identity. In his book *The Location of Culture* Bhabha writes that lack of originality and homogeneity in terms of cultural identity are the key concepts therefore, "image of identity is only ever possible in the negation of any sense of originality or plentitude" (57). Cultural identity is an on-going process, it is created and re-created through the constant process of negotiations which takes place in what Bhabha calls, "Third Space". 'Third Space', though it cannot be represented exactly and constitutes "discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that meaning and symbols of culture have

no primordial unity or fixity” (37). Bhabha describes the idea of “third space” in relation to the cultural identity of colonizer and colonized and suggests that walking through the means of ‘third space’ is like always moving on with human history and reaching “beyond”.

For the last four decades the issue of racial discrimination has been dealt remarkably by the Afro-American writers but till 1960s despite so many reforms it fundamentally remains unchanged in the United States of America and continues to a great extent even today. Toni Morrison, an Afro-American novelist has challenged and exposed racial domination and discrimination in almost all of her narratives. The socio-cultural condition of black society is the cause of the trauma of black people. The views and perspectives popularized and universalized regarding black people by white have created hierarchy in the African society itself. Internalization of racism by African themselves results into stratification in which women are placed on the last of margin.

Toni Morrison reconstructs and reshapes the history of slavery through the memory of past and redefines black women’s identity in white American society from Afro-American’s standpoint. The time of story is set in the late seventeenth century in America when slave trading is in its early years. Florence, the central character of the novel is a part- African and part-Portuguese. This sixteen year old girl lives in a heterogeneous group that Jacob Vaark, a white settler has assembled as members of his family in a farm. This group is composed of Lina, a native woman whose village is devastated by “small pox”; Sorrow, a slow-witted “curly haired goose girl” who grows up on a ship and then one day washes ashore; Rebekka, a European sent by her father to become Vaark’s wife and two indentured servants scully and Willard. The members of this weird group are making a place out of no place for themselves. These women characters, who instead of “love and play” give back fear and anger “(A Mercy 5) are literally at the mercy of men. They take turn narrating the story and their voices carry physical and psychological scares of struggles in their lives. These are the voices that have not been heard before, voices silenced by cruelty of the dominant patriarchal and imperial power.

Florence begins this story with the trauma that she has undergone in her life. Florence mother who offers her six year old girl child to the trader Jacob Vaark and opted to keep her baby boy. The novel ends with mother’s explanation of it. Mother justifies herself in a monologue that because the white man, Jacob Vaark, who comes to visit her master to get back his loan, seems ‘human’ and sees Florence as “ a human child, not piece of eight” and in order to save her little girl’s life from the cruel master she is forced to give her to this man: “to be given dominion over another is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a hard thing” (A Mercy 166, 167) But Florence can never know her mother’s internal confession and what remains for her is the trauma of this harsh memory. She always questions herself that how a mother can give up her little girl and send her off with a white trader. Her traumatic feelings get worse when for the second time she is rejected again by her community.

Florence falls deeply in love with the blacksmith whom Jacob Vaark hired to help him build the new mansion. Unlike others this man, even if an African, is free not bound to do hard work. Morrison describes him as “he had rights, then, and privileges like Sir. He could marry, own things, travel, sell his own labor” (A Mercy 45) He is a free black man who is different from the indentured servants of Vaark’s farm. Like a healer, he cures Sorrow and Rebekka of “small pox”. But when Lina sends Florens, who is uncontrollably in love with him, in search of him to come to cure Rebekka of ‘small pox’ he reminds Florens of being slave and inferior. Morrison writes:

What is your meaning? I am a slave because Sir trades for me.

No. You have become one.

How?

(...)

No. Wait. You put me in misery.

You are nothing but wilderness. No constraint. No mind.

You shout the word- mind, mind, mind- over and over and then you laugh, saying as I live and breathe, a slave by choice.(A Mercy 141)

He rejects Florens’s love and when she leaves the blacksmith, she is devastated by his notions about being slave. Her deep love for him changes into hatred. Florens is tormented by the traumas of her memories. The world that she lives in is a space of no-belonging, ‘un-homeliness’ and in-betweenness. The traumatic experiences she faces transform and reconstruct her identity. She feels no belonging, neither to her own black culture and community nor to the white society. In fact, for being a black woman she has no position in white society and is deprived of her own identity whereas in the black masculine society in complicity with white patriarchy, she is treated as a property. Florence feels no attachment she wanders aimlessly in Vaark’s new mansion.

In Bhabha’s view, the unhomely or the uncanny situation suggests that the personal and public are interrelated. He writes that “the unhomely moment relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunction of political existence” (Bhabha 15). Throughout Morrison’s fictional works, it is evident that the inner life of her characters, the same as Virginia Woolf’s is related to the world in which they live, “the place is a stew of mullattoes, creols, zambos, mestizos, lobos, chinos, coyotes” (A Mercy 30) As per Bill Ashcroft such group of people are product of “ a mixed or miscegenated society and the culture it creates” (Ashcroft 147). The social and cultural context in which the black female characters live is dominated by masculine power that deprived them from their true being and identity. Morrison’s character reconstructs a new home or identity from the memories of the past event. In this way Morrison by her metonymic exploration of language, creates a postmodern form of identity and deconstructs the stability and invincibility of western metaphysics.


Morrison’s depiction of hybrid identity for indicating the existing condition of the unhomely is in the same line of interest for Bhabha who is interested in identities that disrupt and destabilizes the idea of a unified and

heterogeneous identity in the west. He argues that the hybrids, displaced and the non-nationals must invent their own history “(Bhabha 9) through art especially literature, which “renews the past refiguring it as a contingent ‘in-between’ space that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present “(10). Morrison reconstructs the history of American slave trading and psychological abuse of black women in *A Mercy* through the memory of the past events. The stories are related to each other by memory and re-memory and novelist have well altered the narration from one character to another to avoid the establishment of overriding truth.

Morrison tries to find out solution about the problem of marginalization and liminality of black women in the western literature. She depicts the struggle and desire of black women for reconstructing their identity and in this way she deconstructs the norms of white community. Although novel ends in a dangling situation while Florense is wandering in her master’s new mansion and writing her story on the walls, she wants to use a language to speak about the unspeakable condition and to say the ‘unsayable’ sayings and traumas that African- American women suffer in the racialized white patriarchal society. Morrison brings in public domain traumatic experiences in the form of re-memory. In the words of Bouson it means “spontaneous recurrence of the past” (124).

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