Multiculturalism in *A Mercy* by Toni Morrison: Exploring Cultural Identity in the American Nation

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Abstract

In *A Mercy* Toni Morrison uses the narrative polyphony to explore American multiculturalism and to expose at the same time her view about the genesis of the United States of America. Thus, the fragmented narrative produced by this polyphony allows the characters, who can be regarded as the representatives of their respective ethnic groups (European, African-American, Native American), to expose their respective physical and psychological pains while constructing the American national identity. And the expression of self-identity by the characters of the novel is made on the basis of the awareness of their existence. Moreover, in the context of the colonial era, slavery and immigration are to be regarded as the essential factors of American multiculturalism. Therefore, the construction of the American identity is due to the dynamism of the coexistence of many self-identities.

Key words: Narrative polyphony, multiculturalism, identity, immigration, slavery.

Résumé

Dans *A Mercy*, Toni Morrison utilise la polyphonie narrative pour explorer le multiculturalisme américain et pour exposer en même temps son point de vue sur la genèse des États-Unis d'Amérique. Ainsi, le récit fragmenté produit par cette polyphonie permet aux personnages, qui peuvent être considérés comme les représentants de leurs groupes ethniques respectifs (européen, africain-américain, indien), pour exposer leurs sufferances physiques et psychologiques respectives lors de la construction de l'identité nationale américaine. Et l'expression de l'identité de soi par les personnages du roman est faite sur la base de leur conscience d'exister. En outre, dans le contexte de l'époque coloniale, l'esclavage et l'immigration doivent être considérés comme les facteurs essentiels du multiculturalisme américain. Ainsi, la construction de l'identité américaine est due au dynamisme de la coexistence de nombreuses identités de soi.

Mots clés : Polyphonie narrative, multiculturalisme, identité, immigration, esclavage.

Introduction

A Mercy (Morrison, 2008) by Toni Morrison is a historical novel set in the seventeenth century in the new discovered America. Through this novel, Toni Morrison explores the background of what we call the United States of America today by emphasizing the beginning of slavery in early America. As the story turns around African, Native American, Portuguese, Dutch and English and mixed-race characters, Toni Morrison puts the notion of American ethnic groups in a prominent place and relegates the traditional and general white master and black slave relations to the background. Therefore, multiculturalism and the foundation of the American society is underscored in *A Mercy* as it is indicated in the title of this article: "*Multiculturalism in A Mercy by Toni Morrison: Exploring individual cultural identity and the foundation of the American nation*."

Though multiculturalism has been a source of significant societal and political tension in some nations such as the United States of America where racial hostilities have become prominent, and racial and ethnic assimilation persist, it advocates equal respect of cultural diversity in a society, makes easier personal relationships with others, and encourages memberships in social groups. In this trend, individual identities are essential to the dynamic construction of multicultural societies.

In the context of the lawless America of the seventeenth century as it is revealed in *A Mercy*, it is important to focus our analysis on the questions of slavery, cultural identity and the coexistence of several races in the process of America's foundation, and how Toni Morrison explores them in her work. Thus, the objective of this article is to show how African, Native American and European ethnic groups contributed to construct the American national cultural identity, namely the American multiculturalism, from their proper historical and cultural histories.

Therefore, in our analysis, we will first survey how Toni Morrison evokes the survival of a variety of cultural identities on the American soil. Secondly, we will examine how from a difficult coexistence, different races succeeded in constructing an American identity.

I – Multiculturalism and identity or the narrative of the self

A Mercy's multivocal narrative displays multiculturalism. Indeed, though Florens remains the main narrator, Toni Morrison gives voice to other characters: Jacob Vaark, an Anglo-Dutch farmer (the second chapter); Lina, an American native girl (the fourth chapter); Rebekka an English woman and Jacob Vaark's wife (the sixth chapter); Sorrow, a female foundling (eighth chapter); Willard and Scully, two indentured servants (the tenth chapter); and Florens's mother, a slave woman (the final chapter). They relate their respective lives marked by their physical and emotional sufferances. Thus, instead of being linear, the narrative is fragmented by "*a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses*" (Bakhtin, 2004: 6).

Through this polyphonic art, Toni Morrison takes the opposite tendency to have a traditional central narrator in the novel. She would like to allow the characters to reveal their respective identities by telling their own histories because "*they take turns narrating the story, and their voices carry the physical and psychological scars of their struggles in their lives* (Jamili and Faryam, 2011: 310).

Moreover, they tell how they all, including Jacob Vaark himself, came together to his New York plantation to form a heterogeneous group. They can be regarded as the representatives of their respective ethnic groups. And their individual identities are to be viewed as the identities of the different ethnic groups to which they belong.

In *A Mercy*, characters' self-presentation entails African, Native American, European and mixed-race's presentations. In parallel, the expression of self-identity by the respective characters displays African, Native American, European and mixed-race's identities. And, self-identity is to be related to self-knowledge which supposes that an individual is conscious of his thoughts, his feelings and his beliefs.

However, the expression of self-identity in *A Mercy* is to be viewed in connection to the concept of "*Active self-knowledge*" respectively referred to as "*the phenomenal self*" by E. E Jones and H Gerard, "*the spontaneous self–concept*" by McGuire and Fujioka, and "*the working self-concept*" by Markus and Kund (Swann and Bosson, 2010: 591).

Indeed, it is necessary to make a distinction between Active self-knowledge and stored self-knowledge because "*Active self-knowledge includes information about oneself that is held in consciousness. It has been referred to as the phenomenal self. […] Stored self-knowledge includes information about the self that is held in memory but is not being attended to*" (Swann and Bosson, 2010: 591).

As shown above in their narrative sequence, Florens is the first narrator. Then, she is the first character to introduce herself. Her first sentence which is "*Don't be afraid*" (p. 3), is a kind of warning which psychologically prepares the narratee to expect the trauma the characters have in general, but which she is especially experiencing in a world "*breaking open*"(p. 5), and whose "*newness trembles*"(p. 5) her.

The usage of the first personal pronoun "*I*", the pronoun object "*me*", and the possessive adjective "*my*" throughout all her narrating sequences *("My telling", "I have done", "I promise"* (p. 3), *"I'm lettered"* (p. 4), *"I wonder"*(p. 5), *"Me watching"*(p. 8), etc…) is a testimony of being not only an homodiegetic character, but also an experiencing self as set up by Monika Fludernik in her *An Introduction to Narratology* when she states:

> *In first-person narrative we distinguish between the function of the self as protagonist (experiencing self) and that of the (usually) retrospective narrator as the narrating self. In many modern and postmodern texts, the experiencing self predominates* (Fludernik, 2009: 152).

Besides, the I-narrative is a representative "I" which prompts Toni Morrison to use Florens as a trans-individual character to account for the foundation of a nation. So, all these elements cited above make clear that Florens gets conscious of her being and her identity as a human and a moral self. In this context, Florens appears to be "*an "I" that can consider an object that is 'me'*" (Leary, Tangney, 2012: 71). She reflects on herself because "*the term self includes both the actor who thinks ('I am thinking') and the object of thinking ('about me')*" (Leary, Tangney, 2012: 71). The awareness of having thoughts recalls the Cartesian syllogism "*Cogito ergo sum*" or "*I think, therefore I am*," (Descartes, 1973: 123): Florens thinks, therefore she exists.

Indeed, it is on account of what has been said that Florens recounts in the first chapter her arrival on Jacob Vaark's plantation, which results from an act of mercy "*bestowed by God*" (p. 167). The first chapter could be regarded as Florens's biography because it introduces her and enables the reader to discover and understand who she really is. And some details are given about her life. Indeed, Florens hasn't received any formal education but she is literate. So, it's a prowess for her to write from memory some biblical passages such as the Nicene Creed. Nevertheless, she has received a religious education and she bears a Christian name without a family name. She is deprived of the essential identification mark which the

family name is. That is to say, her fragmentary acculturation is due to her conversion to Christianity.

On the linguistic level, the absence of a real family structure with a father and a mother, and the disappearance of African slaves' mother tongues have made Florens speak no African dialect. Thus, when she was brought to Jacob Vaark's plantation, she was not able to utter any word.

At last, she sums her cultural alienation up with the following statement in the eleventh chapter: "*I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full"* (p. 161). Like many other African slaves, Florens does not have any cultural heritage. Her experience does not differ from that of black slaves who are usually sold or bartered. Coming to Jacob Vaark's plantation, Florens was prevented from being sexually abused. But to be sure, the separation between her mother and her created a psychological wound because she is a salve.

Likewise, in the last chapter, Florens's mother relates how she was captured, sold and transferred to America. Yet, she focuses on the physical and psychological trauma she experiences with her enslavement. Florens and her are representatives of the black race. They are both females and through their respective experiences of slavery we notice that "*to be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below"* (p. 163).

Indeed, the expression of self–identities through polyphony is one of the fundamental marks of multiculturalism because it allows for differentiating among protagonists. And the narrative's polyphony appears to be a channel of defining self and one's culture. Multiculturalism is thus the sum of experiences of individuals, members of different ethnic and social groups. In addition to Florens and her mother, the narrative's polyphony makes the reader discover the cultural identities of other characters of different ethnic groups such as Lina, the Native American.

Lina's story, which recounts her arrival on Jacob Vaark's plantation, is told in the third person singular, mainly in the fourth chapter. Through this chapter, the narrator allows the reader to know that Lina is a Native American orphan, a survivor to measles epidemics which has decimated her tribe. Lina didn't really know herself. She did not know her parents either. She had been enslaved by Presbyterians who sold her to Jaccob Vaark when she was fourteen. Like Florens, she bore a Christian name because *"they [Presbyterians] named her Messalina, just in case, but shortened it to Lina a single silver of hope"* (p. 47). *"She had no standing in law, no surname and no one would take her word against a Europe"* (p. 52).

Indeed, slave owners usually gave slaves new names which were different from their family names. Doing it, they reduced the slaves to the level of four footed beasts, domestic animals which did not know anything about their conditions. Slaves were deprived of the elemental marks of identity. So to speak, there was a destructured personality even in the naming: a broken name for a broken identity, a reduced name for a reduced human personality, an arbitrary naming for a hazardous personality.

To be sure, Lina's story is told in the third person singular, but sometimes, Toni Morrison allows her to make some precisions. Then, she uses the direct speech to help us determine the level of correctness in the narrative and the truthfulness of the information carried. The evidence is given when she considered herself as an exiled person on her native land: *"'You [a forest beech] and I, this land is our home … But unlike you I am exile here'"* (p. 59).

Obviously, Lina's identity has changed. And her statement shows that both her cultural identity and her native land are lost. In fact, Native Americans "*were regarded as fair game for exploitation, conquest, and ultimately dispossession of their territorial and political independence by competing European powers in quest of expanding their empires in the New World"* (Williams, 1994: 13). Initially occupied by Native Americans, some american lands became royal colonies with the English philosophical spirit of expanding the land granted by the King because it was an "*ad hoc territory*" (p. 13). The development of the colonies and the capitalist transformation of agriculture by European colonists in general, but particularly by Jacob Vaark, make clear the presence of European indentured servants like Willard and Scully, two homosexual, and Sorrow, a European female slave, on his plantation.

To sum up, on the one hand, Toni Morrison's use of polyphony is a means to make the reader have a deep knowledge and understanding of the different characters' individual identities. On the other hand, it shows the high level of consciousness these characters have concerning their respective individual identities and their social plight in the context of slavery in colonial America. Therefore, polyphony is a theory that makes *A Mercy* a work that contains *"a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousness" (*Bakhtin, 1984: 6) because it enables the characters to express their self-identities.

Through the presence of people of diverse ethnic groups and identities in *A Mercy*, Toni Morrison exposes her view about the genesis of what we call America today. Then, she granted us the opportunity to explore a multicultural approach of the construction of the American identity from diverse ethnic identities.

II -From individual identities to Multiculturalism: the construction of American identity

In the context of colonial America which is underscored in *A Mercy*, multiculturalism is the coexistence of many self-identities which results from immigration and slavery. That is to say, at the beginning, Virginia, as it is enclosed in the noun, was a virgin land like the Eden Garden with *"forests untouched since Noah"* (p. 12). It later became a tobacco-growing homestead, including Jacob Vaark's tobacco plantation which was populated by Jacob Vaark himself; his wife, Rebekka, a good-natured London native; Florens, Lina, Sorrow, Scully and Willard. Except Lina, their arrival resulted from a successive immigration which started with Jacob Vaark himself, "*a free man from New Amsterdam"* (p. 69).

Like ninety young women who came to be wives of the colonists in 1619 (Elson, 1904: 60) his wife Rebekka arrived. As for Lina, the only Native American character in the novel, she is a slave like Florens and Sorrow. But Florens is an African-American slave whereas Sorrow is a foundling of mixed race accepted by Jacob Vaark as an orphan. In addition to these characters, there are Scully and Willard, two European indentured laborers. Therefore, Virginia was a land which hosted people of different origins: there were Dutch, English, Africans, Native Americans, and other Europeans. There is even a Portuguese: D'Ortega the slave trader. So to speak, it is fitting to define multiculturalism as followed:

> *Multiculturalism refers to the coexistence of several cultures in a country. In the northern American context, it is inherent to the arrival of successive waves of immigration. In the United States, immigration is secular and plural by its origins and its demography is in constant evolution. The country constitutes a mosaic of populations, extremely varied and extremely various by their culture. As Walt Whitman said, 'America is a nation of nations* (Mambou, 2013: 21).

Certainly, at that moment anomy prevailed because there was a mess in Virginia in 1682. Half a dozen years before there was the Beacon rebellion whose immediate consequence was the making of "*lawless laws encouraging cruelty in exchange for common cause, if not common virtue"* (p. 101). So, Virginia remained a place of racial exploitation. But the different characters form a group of people of diverse ethnic cultures. They embody the multicultural society which will become the United States of America later on.

As there are free men, slaves and indentured, from different races, this group is featured by diversity, inequality, but homogeneity which prompt the respective characters to

break the existing cultural barriers between them. Sociologically, their relationships are defined by interdependence and interaction between them because they are obliged to live together as Florens said: *"You are my shaper and my world as well. It is done. No need to choose"* (p. 71). They depend on each other and everyone stands in need of the services of others. In other terms, though the setting in *A Mercy* concerns pre-industrial America, they belong to a group whose development is based on a group solidarity termed as *"organic solidarity"* by Emile Durkheim in his *Division of Labor in Society* (Durkheim, 1947: 29).

Indeed, Durkheim uses the concepts of "*mechanical solidarity*" and "*organic solidarity*" to characterize two kinds of group or social solidarity on which societal development can be based. He argues that in pre-industrial societies, social solidarity was achieved through "*mechanical solidarity*" marked by similar conditions with common values which unite the society together, but with little interdependence between the respective members. In contrast, *"organic solidarity"* is characterized by interdependence and interaction between the members of modern societies where collective conscience is no longer developed all together creating a new social order.

As a matter of fact, in *A Mercy* the characters develop a new kind of racial and cultural relations shaped by interdependence and mutual need among themselves. Therefore, they develop kindness and mercy, and show compassion to one and another. So to speak, although Jacob Vaark morally condemns slavery, he is involved in it. Of course, the first feeling which comes to mind with such a contradiction is hypocrisy. But on the ground of a deep analysis, the first hypothesis which can be set out is Jacob Vaark's necessity to get slaves for his plantation. It is important to make clear that "*investing in the Barbados plantations is one of Vaark's last acts in the novel, but it is a defining decision in American history - it represents the moment when it was determined that the engine of capitalism in the New World would be slave labour in distant lands"* (Adams, 2008). The second hypothesis is Jacob Vaark's expressive kindness which is symbolized by his act of mercy toward Florens. Surely, this act of mercy is of paramount importance, as it especially hoists him up to the first place of those who break racial barriers in his society. Then, it is no longer surprising that he "*behaved as though the blacksmith was his brother* (p. 60).

The blacksmith is a free African, never enslaved, who has been hired by Jacob Vaark to fashion iron gates with kissing cobras for his new house. By some irony the only free African has no name and is reduced to a social function. Having a name here implies the slave status for names are given by slave owners. His role is reduced to his social use. As he has a

healing power, Rebekka sends Florens to call for him when she gets ill after her husband dies of smallpox. And the great part of the story in *A Mercy* is about Florens' journey to find him.

Being a salve, Florens could escape but she feels it her duty to find the medicine that will cure her Mistress. This duty is shared by Sorrow, and Lina who loves her Mistress. Accordingly, Lina tries to save Mrs. Vaark before Florens' departure by using traditional medicines which involve natural and magic cures.

Lina is the representative of the Native Indian tribes. And she no longer trusts western medicine. Her knowledge of nature is a real cultural advantage. Although she has been baptized by the Presbyterians, she still trusts in her cultural values. That is to say, Lina has kept her indianity but she contributes to the dynamism of her community. As an evidence of this, *"it was she who taught him [Jacob Vaark] how to dry the fish they caught; to anticipate spawning and how to protect a crop from night creatures"* (p. 49). These characters wanted to save Mrs. Vaark because she was the only guarantee of their freedom and their respective lives; Jacob Vaark is dead and he has no offspring to be his heir.

Thanks to the dynamism of their community, the characters in *A Mercy* constructed a collective identity which gives a meaning to their lives:

> *Collective identity provides a sense of security for its members by making the world meaningful, permitting intra-collectivity communication and constructing collective forms of knowledge that allow the individual to lead a life without having constantly to make (new) sense of whatever phenomena s/he encounters* (Schopflin: 2001).

Together, they redefine their ways of living based on social cohesion, unity and mutual understanding in a context of cultural diversity. They create a melting pot society. Hence, in American history, these values granted American colonies the strength and the courage to secure liberty when they decided to separate from the English metropolis through the War of Independence or the Revolution War held from 1775 to 1783, and which resulted into the Declaration of Independence on 4th July 1776. So, "*America has always been a nation of immigrants; it remains so today. (…) The American identity has always been partly a dream about shared values and national unity"* (Kelley, 2006: 1).

Conclusion

From this analysis, it can be asserted that *A Mercy* traces back the history of the United States of America. It deeply plunges the reader into the roots of the construction of America's multicultural identity which results from the coexistence of many ethnic groups; namely, Africans, Native Indians and Europeans. Their meeting on the American soil results from immigration and slavery. Thus, the representative characters of the respective ethnic groups have their proper histories which are mainly characterized by the physical and psychological trauma they have all experienced.

Therefore, to make the reader know their individual sufferance, Toni Morrison uses polyphony a narrative device which allows each character to express his own history. Accordingly, Toni Morrison points out the construction of self-identity or individual self, which is one of the prominent factors of multiculturalism in colonial America. It is that plurality of consciousness which resulted into the construction of the american identity itself.

It is in reference to multiculturalism that in 1776 the founding fathers of the United States of America designed the National Great Seal of the country with the Latin phrase "E Pluribus Unum", which means "out of many, one", signifying that Americans are from a variety of sources. It is also important to note that this phrase was considered a de facto motto of the United States for nearly two hundred years until it was changed to "In God We Trust" in 1955. So, Toni Morrison explores her vision of the American genesis in *A Mercy*.

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