

**Trauma and Healing: A Psychoanalytic Reading of Florens' Confession in
Toni Morrison's *A Mercy***

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Abstract

The theme of trauma, reiterated in African-American literature, always carries a kind of unbearable memory and of the forgotten history of pain into the distress that African Americans have suffered. This paper elaborates on the traumatic impact on the life of Florens, a black female slave in seventeenth-century America through a reading of Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the first section begins with an analysis of trauma studies, especially those described by Sigmund Freud and Cathy Caruth, which I shall examine in terms of the significant theme of "abandoned child" in the novel. I shall then revisit Fanon's theory of racism in *Black Skin, White Masks*, which suggests that the psychic structure is operated by a political ideology of identity. This ideology explains why, when she meets the villagers in Widow Ealing's house, Florens is traumatized by their 'white' gaze. A detailed textual analysis of the third section of the final scene in *A Mercy*, reveals how Florens could be healed by "telling" her story in her master's house. Lastly, I argue that, through psychoanalytic theories, especially those concerned with trauma studies, an understanding of trauma transforms and enriches human experiences and how the construction of identity may be possible during the healing process.

Keywords:

trauma, racism, healing, *A Mercy*

Alongside Florens' sincere and honest "confession" in *A Mercy*, Morrison not only provides a lens through which to examine the ineradicable suffering due to inhuman life experiences, but she also asserts the power of language through writing/telling in that it is capable of healing trauma. As a prequel to *Beloved*¹, *A Mercy* explores the black female slave's identity in America by spinning the tale of "abandoned child and helpless mother," which is intended to speak for those suffering women who, throughout history, are also deprived of their voices. In order to examine the significant theme of "abandoned child," the first section of the essay discusses how trauma studies, which have evolved from Sigmund Freud, Cathy Caruth and

other theorists, enrich our understandings of the theme of abandonment in *A Mercy*. However, *A Mercy* is set in a time before racism has been established as grounds for slavery; that is the period before, as Morrison states, “slavery and black became married.” And Morrison vividly describes how racial discrimination, which comes from the difference in skin color, impacts on Florens. The second section thus elucidates how the ‘white gaze’ traumatizes Florens, via Fanon’s theory of racism, which is that the psychic structure is operated by political ideology. As a psychoanalyst, he attempts to save suffering black patients from repeatedly identifying with the constructed “white consciousness.” In addition, I shall refer to Lacan’s concept of “mirror stage” to explain how Fanon appropriates this idea to create his own discourse. A detailed textual analysis of the third section shows how Florens might be healed by “telling” her story in her master’s house. Since Jacob Vaark (Sir) saved her when she was an abandoned child, she has been haunted by loss and separation, which makes her feel insecure. This explains why she is eager, as Morrison notes, to “engulf” the blacksmith in passionate love. But the failure of love adds to the pains of past traumas, so that Florens embarks on a “working-through” task by writing her story arduously in Sir’s unfinished house. In the final analysis, I suggest that Morrison conveys a positive message – that the healing of a traumatic past is possible if we believe in the redemptive power of writing.

The Trauma of Abandonment: “*There is no protection*”

The original meaning of trauma comes from the Greek τραῦμα, or “wound,” referring to an injury to the body. Medical and psychological literature, such as Cathy Caruth in her reference to Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, accepts the later usage of this term to mean, “a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (Caruth 3), owing to the fundamental connection between human beings and their surroundings. In response to Freud’s analysis of trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis explicate the relationship between human beings and their surroundings, indicating that “the ‘living vesicle’ (blister) is sheltered from external stimuli by a protective shield or layer which allows only tolerable quantities of excitation through” (Laplanche and Pontalis 414). Hence, if the shield or layer suffers any breach, trauma appears, suggesting that trauma results from the lack of a protective mechanism; therefore, the treatment of trauma offers victims an opportunity for, or access to, healing. However, to heal victims in this sense, does not indicate that people will either forget, or ignore, things that have already traumatized them. Rather, the healing process provides them an opportunity to recognize and encounter the core of trauma, so that they can accept the facts as part of

their memories. If the awareness and acceptance of trauma is possible, therefore, victims may be encouraged to continue with their lives more positively. Furthermore, by treating trauma as a “crying wound,” Caruth describes this by revisiting Freud’s example from *Tancred and Clorinda*:

The action of Tancred [...] is not just the unconscious act of the infliction of the injury and its inadvertent and unwished-for repetition, but the moving and sorrowful *voice* that cries out, a paradoxical release through the wound (Caruth 2).

Freud refers to this story in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. The hero, Tancred, unconsciously kills his beloved Clorinda when she was disguised in the armour of an enemy knight. After her burial he enters a strange, magical forest. As he slashes at a tree with his sword, blood streams from the cut and he hears Clorinda’s voice complaining that he has wounded his lover once again (Freud 22). Caruth uses this epic story to explain trauma, which is a witness to not only the victims’ unknowing acts, but also “the otherness of a human voice that cries out from [the] wound” (Caruth 3), thus the significance of hearing voices from the “crying wound”. And the effects of trauma vary within the different periods of life in which the trauma occurs; accordingly, children, owing to their psychic integrity, are more vulnerable to trauma than adults. Therefore, “the greatest danger is the separation from, or the loss of, parents, which, of course, stems from the child’s dependence” (Schreiber 9). According to Schreiber, in *A Mercy*, it is easy to understand why a “mother’s abandonment” is underlined within the intricate structure of trauma, especially in Florens’ experiences.

Only if we sympathize with Florens’ situation can we locate the theme of abandonment in *A Mercy*. As Shirley A. Stave and Justine Tally suggest, the theme of abandonment in the novel, “both literal and metaphorical, specifically insofar as African-American identity is fraught with the knowledge of an original displacement from home and family that was sustained through the institution of chattel slavery” (Stave and Tally 4). In fact, Florens’ mother thinks that she does not abandon her, since Jacob’s “act of mercy” saves her from a life under cruel masters, Senhor, Senhora, and their sons. However, not realizing the reason why her mother abandons her, Florens has been traumatized since the moment her mother begged Jacob to foster her. In this sense, her mother’s abandonment creates the original kernel of Florens’ trauma. As the dust jacket states, the heart of the novel “is the ambivalent, disturbing story of a mother who casts off her daughter in order to save her, and of a daughter who may never exorcise that abandonment.” As a woman sexually abused by her master, Florens’ mother understands that the woman in slavery has no protection, and

“to be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below” (*A Mercy* 193). When she sees that the tall man, Jacob Vaark, sees Florens “as a human child” (195), she chooses to give him her child because there “was no animal” in his heart (191). However, Florens never treats this “separation” as a mercy, but she believes that her mother’s motive was to stand “hand in hand with her little boy” (2); therefore, she is haunted by the trauma of abandonment.

At first when she is brought to Vaark’s plantation, Florens would not talk, because she is scared by the thought of her “mother nursing greedy babies” (*A Mercy* 9). Then, as she grows older, she desperately falls in love with the blacksmith, which she treats as compensation for the abandonment she experienced, thereby losing her precious virginity. Here she thinks:

“You (the blacksmith) are my protection. Only you. [...] I don’t want to be free of you because I live only with you. [...] You are my shaper and my world as well. It is done. No need to choose” (81-83).

Indeed, this passionate love provides a “mirrored self” (Schreiber 167) for her to immerse in the illusion that she never separates from her mother, which explains why the presence of Malaik reminds her of her abandonment. Comparing Malaik to her little brother, who has gained all her mother’s love, Florens projects her resentment against him onto Malaik, who she attacks while waiting for the blacksmith. For her, “Sir’s boots” provide a sense of safety, which is what she attains from the blacksmith’s love. In this manner, as she describes it, “I know he steals Sir’s boots that belong to me” (164). In this way she is treating the blacksmith as a person who furnishes her with love, while she cowers, as if she is abandoned again when he calls Malaik’s name first. Without receiving any “word of sorrow for knocking me off my feet” (165) or “tender fingers to touch where you (the blacksmith) hurt me,” Florens is only told, “your head is empty and your body is wild” (167).

The Racial Question: “*She is Afric*”

For Morrison, “the trauma of racism is [...] the severe fragmentation of the self” (Page 26); hence racial trauma matters in the process of Florens’ self-quest, during which she chances to meet her “traumatic core” in order to attain protection. When Florens “visits” Widow Ealing and Daughter Jane, she confronts her abandoned core and is traumatized by the villagers. The affectionate relationship between Widow Ealing and Daughter Jane reminds Florens of the mother who is not there to teach her things and to protect her for whenever she encounters danger. Daughter Jane, who is regarded as an incarnation of a demon because one of her eyes “as straight and

unwavering as a she-wolf's" (*A Mercy* 126), has to pass the villager's "examination" and to prove she is a "normal" human being. In order to save her daughter from punishment, Widow Ealing teaches her that demons do not bleed and that by making her legs bloody she can prove herself. When she sees this, Florens thinks: "If my mother is not dead she can be teaching me these things" (129). Paradoxically, Florens "accidentally" saves Daughter Jane because the villagers shift their focus to her skin color. When the villagers examine her body as if she were naked, she "watches for what is in their eyes. [Neither] hate is there, nor scar or disgust; but they are looking at my body across the distances without recognition"(133). In addition, the little girl's reaction (not Daughter Jane but one of villagers) hurts Florens as well. She not only "screams and hides behinds the skirts of one of the women" (131) but she also says "it scares me; it scares me" (133) repeatedly.

This traumatic scene echoes Fanon's description in *Black Skin, White Masks* – a frightened boy who screams when he encounters a black man, "Mama, see the Negro! I'm frightened." In response to the traumatic scene he sees, Fanon says: "Frightened! Frightened! Now they were beginning to be afraid of me. I made up my minds to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible" (Fanon 112). As he suggests that the black man "must be black in relation to the white man"(110), the "subjectivisation" of the black man goes constantly along with white hegemony, in which the discourse of "white skin privilege" is configured by the colonizers and forcibly internalized by the black man. Rejecting Mannoni's idea whereby the "colonial psychology" is a reflection of the colonizer's inferiority complex and the dependency complex of those they colonized, which, to some extent, justifies their violent behavior. In the fourth chapter of his *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon asks why "people with black skin should wear white masks," in response to Mannoni's assertion in his book, *Prospero and Caliban: the Psychology of Colonization*, that when the motherland send them to the colonies, the colonizers are also traumatized by the "fear of abandonment," thus leading to feelings of inferiority. At the same time, Mannoni believes, because of their "dependency complex," it is hard for the colonized to "grow up." In the colonial context, both currents are inevitably infused together and coexist complementarily. In his analysis, Mannoni stresses how the colonial situation is created; therefore it is easy to treat his comments as supporting colonization in paternalistic terms. For Fanon, however, it is the colonizers dwelling in their homelands who actually decide colonial policy; whereas Mannoni expresses the view that only the colonists themselves suffer from feelings of inferiority, which does not explain why those people without inferiority complexes proceeds with the colonial task. Fanon sums up by stating that, "what we want from Mannoni is an explanation

of the colonial situation. He notably overlooks providing it” (Fanon 94).

To explain how the black man’s “subject” is established, in a four-page footnote Fanon appropriates Lacan’s concept of “mirror stage,” which represents a fundamental aspect of the structure of subjectivity by describing the process of identification formation through the ego – the outcome of identifying with a person’s own mirror-like image, so that the person recognizes him/herself before he/she can completely control bodily movements (Lacan, 75-82). Lacan elucidates that, when a baby sees its own image as a whole in the mirror, it is in contrast to its own actual, but uncoordinated, body. In order to solve this dilemma, the baby may identify with the image, and “this primary identification with the counterpart is what forms the ego” (Evans 114). The concept of mirror stage, as Evers notes, marks “the most important stage in the pre-Oedipal life of the child, as well as a more general dynamic of the introjection of images that would continue into adult life, defined by the register of the Imaginary” (Evers 18).

Fanon further extends this fundamental structure of human identification to the mechanism of the black man’s identification, on the basis of ego formation, by indicating that:

“[...] one can no further doubt that the real Other for the white man is and will continue to be the black man. And conversely, only for the white man, the Other is perceived on the level of body image, absolutely the not-self –that is, the unidentifiable, the unassimilable. For the black man, as we have shown, historical realities come into the picture. ‘The subject’s recognition of his image in the mirror’, Lacan says, ‘is a phenomenon that is doubly significant for the analysis of this stage [...] the phenomenon [...] shows in convincing fashion the tendencies that currently constitute reality for subject; the mirror stage [...] affords a good symbol of reality: of its affective value, illusory, like the image, and of its structure, as it reflects the human form [...]’” (Fanon 161)

In fact, occupying the privileged position in both political and economic aspects within the colonial context, the colonizer is the only agent who can monopolistically operate what Lacan calls “symbolic order” – that is, owing to an ideological dominance, the colonizer can define how the colonized individual “imagines” his/her identity, and how they perceive the world. Although the black man – as the Other of the body image – constitutes the white man’s subjectivity interactively, the differences between the black and the white man are reduced to the biological/physical level by the ideology the white man projects on to the symbolic order. This biological/physical reduction marks the margin of the white man’s

“subject,” so that it allows the white man to drive the black man out of “normality.” As an unidentifiable figure in the “white symbolic,” the black man can only recognize himself in an outcast/inferior existence, so that he has to accept all values implanted by this “white symbolic” if he is eager to be, what society defines as, “man.” Therefore, only if the black man wears a white mask can he/she become a “real” man in the ideology dominated by white consciousness.

On her journey to the blacksmith’s home, Florens perceives that the white man’s ideological gaze stares at her body and she describes it thus:

“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. They want to see if my tongue is split like a snake’s or if my teeth are filing to points to chew them up. [...] I climb the streambed under watching trees and know I am not the same. I am losing something with every step I take. [...] Something precious is leaving me. I am a thing apart. With the letter I belong and am lawful. Without it I am a weak calf abandoned by the herd, a turtle without shell, a minion with no telltale signs but a darkness I am born with, outside, yes, but inside as well and the inside dark is small, feathered and toothy. Is what my mother knows? Why she chooses me to live without?” (*A Mercy* 135)

Instead of pretending that she is treated as a normal girl by the white gaze, Florens understands that villagers scorn her and she should protect herself by the letter her Mistress has entrusted to her. As Schreiber describes, Florens accepts “her nothingness and her dark core [when she] embodies Lacan’s Real by internalizing the community’s projection of evil onto her” (Schreiber 168). The Real, in Lacan’s view, is “the impossible because it is impossible to imagine; impossible to integrate into the symbolic order and impossible to attain in any way” (Evans 160). He goes on to state, “this feature of impossibility and of resistance to the symbolization lends the Real its essentially traumatic quality” (161). The Real is what we have already lost, which the symbolic, white consciousness, cannot represent; therefore, Florens’ embodiment of the Real could be treated as the power of black unfathomable implications. Hence, Florens is “not afraid of anything now. The sun’s going leaves darkness behind – and the dark is me ...” (*A Mercy* 136). Morrison’s achievements, in this sense, are the dismantlement “of the fixed identity constructions DuBois invokes” and the formation of “a new self at odds with socially prescribed categories” (Montgomery 628).

The Redemptive Power of Writing

This novel starts from Florens' saying, "Don't be afraid" (3), and ends with her saying, "Are you afraid? You should be" (184). In this way, Morrison conveys a positive message that Florens has attained some measure of growth after she goes on an errand to find the blacksmith because her Mistress was ill. "So you can see her growth. She ends much more like what her mother wanted her to be" (Crowder), Morrison says. Therefore, all Florens' first-person narratives not only stress her traumatic experiences, but they also demonstrate that her growth and healing are possible. As I illustrated in the previous sections, Florens' traumatic experiences originate from what she believes to be the abandonment of her mother, which explains her hunger for the blacksmith's love. When Mistress asks her to find the blacksmith to save her life, Florens expects the blacksmith to respond equally to her passion. Unfortunately, on this journey of "self quest," she not only suffers trauma due to her color and her living in Widow Ealing's house, but she is also distressed when the blacksmith shouts her wrong name. Her suffocating love is doomed to fail, thus she verbalizes her trauma, by way of confession, in Sir's house after she runs from the blacksmith. As Florens says to the blacksmith, "I cannot tell it to anyone but you" (188). Hence, the consequence of her "compulsory" confession reveals the traumatic core in her mind, which makes her healing, at the end of the story, possible. This, I believe, also signifies the redemptive, or therapeutic, power of writing.

Morrison, indeed, emphasizes the power of writing in *A Mercy*. In the penultimate chapter, Florens confesses that "In the beginning when I come to this room I am certain the telling will give me the tears I never have" (*A Mercy* 185), and she teaches Daughter Jane that an abnormal, or a wild, woman is never stopped by the "bloody legs" (188). Her tears indicate that Florens is in the process of healing by reconstructing her traumatic memory. According to Judith Herman, remembrance and mourning by which the traumatized person "tells her story of the trauma," are central tasks of recovery" (Herman 141) and he further states that, "this work of reconstruction actually transforms the traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated into the survivor's life story" (175). Concerning Morrison's political aesthetics constructed by her words, the significance of healing is not only represented at the individual level, but also at the communicative level. At the individual level, Herman states:

"In the telling, the trauma story becomes a testimony [...] the universality of testimony as a ritual of healings [...] The use of the word *testimony* links both meanings, giving a new larger dimension to the patient's individual experience" (140).

In fact, Florens' "testimony" is an embodiment of both her telling and her independence, so that she proudly concludes, "the soles of my feet are hard as cypress" (*A Mercy* 189). This trope relates to her obsession with "Sir's boots;" if her feet are strong enough to walk her own way, there is no need for her to seek the shelter in his boots. At the communicative level, Florens' writing, spun from her traumatic experiences, is possibly a witness to the independence of slavery as well as a remedy for "black" history. Although the description is elusive, it's probable that Florens burns Sir's house to express her wrath and pain at the end of her confession, together with her rage against racism and injustice. Morrison writes:

"These careful words, closed up and wide open, will talk to themselves. Round to round, side to side, bottom to top, top to bottom all across the room. Or. Or perhaps not. Perhaps these words need the air that is out in the world" (189).

After this violent act, Florens knows she has become wildness, but she says, "I am also Florens" (189). By doing so, Florens ends up owning herself.

Conclusion

In a report of her 2010 speech at Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Toni Morrison has ever talked about her treatment of the ending scene in *A Mercy*. When the editor asked if Florens and her mother could meet at the end, she said, "I thought about it, but then I decided against it, because slavery cuts through families. That is what it does; [I am] unapologetic and there are no answers for those it affects" (Crowder). From my analysis in this paper, it may be concluded that all the traumatic experiences imposed on Florens precisely results from her slavery. On the one hand, Florens' mother gives her away owing to the worry about her daughter's maturing breasts, which perhaps "caught Senhor's eye" (195). The repeated sentence in the last chapter – "There is no protection" – vividly depicts the mother's fear that Florens would be hurt by the master's, or his son's, sexual abuse if she continued to live with her. This "abandonment" traumatizes Florens, because she misrecognizes that her mother merely wanted to "hold the little boy's [her son's] hand" (9). However, in the last two chapters, Morrison spins the ending scene by incorporating both Florens' and her mother's narrative, in which she not only elucidates why she abandons her daughter, but also demonstrates how Florens becomes independent through her own writing.

On the other hand, Florens foresees the fate of the American black community, which suffered the cruelty of slavery. Though Morrison has ever said that "slavery is too big of a topic" (Ulaby), *A Mercy* is the novel in an attempt to "remove race from

slavery.” And what she appears to have done is not only to probe into the cause of racial discrimination, but also “to look at a moment when people came here running away from something terrible – slavery” (Crowder). By providing a hopeful ending for her readers, Morrison conveys the positive message that the healing of a traumatic past is possible if we believe in the redemptive power of writing.

End Note

¹ *Beloved* (1987), a novel by Toni Morrison, is also a story about an abandoned child (Beloved) and a helpless mother (Sethe), in which the mother kills her daughter to protect her from the cruelty of slavery. Someday, the girl who incarnates as Sethe’s murdered daughter appears and the repressed memories of experiences of slavery are gradually uncovered.

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