

**A *MERCY*: MOTHERHOOD AND MATERNAL  
LOSS IN BLACK SLAVE WOMEN**

**A *MERCY*: MATERNIDAD Y PÉRDIDA MATERNAL EN  
LAS MUJERES NEGRAS ESCLAVAS**



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## **ABSTRACT**

African American slavery has long been a topic of great interest to study and research. The aim of this essay is to analyze the psychological effects that African American slavery caused in black slave women, mainly due to the separation from their children in order to be sold away from them. The novel *A Mercy* (2008) by Toni Morrison has been chosen as the main source of analysis. By means of the character of Florens, I intend to show the psychological effects of maternal loss in black slave women. Moreover, the novel reveals the existence of other mothers or surrogate mothers, in some cases, to meet the necessity of loving and being loved by a mother. After an exhaustive study, the results prove that African slave women were the most vulnerable group, because they were affected by slavery both physically and psychologically. In addition, through the analysis of the novel *A Mercy* (2008), we also witness how many of these women had to “sell” their own children to protect them from the same cruel and harsh future.

**Key words:** African American slavery, black slave mothers, motherhood, maternal loss.

## **RESUMEN**

La esclavitud afroamericana ha sido durante mucho tiempo un tema de gran interés para el estudio y la investigación. El objetivo de este trabajo es analizar los efectos psicológicos que la esclavitud afroamericana causó en las mujeres negras esclavas, principalmente debido a la separación de sus hijos para ser vendidos lejos de ellas. La novela *A Mercy* (2008) de Toni Morrison ha sido elegida como la principal fuente de análisis. Por medio del personaje de Florens, intento mostrar los efectos psicológicos de la pérdida maternal en las mujeres negras esclavas. Además, la novela revela la existencia de otras madres o madres subrogadas, en algunos casos, para satisfacer la necesidad de amar y ser amado/a por una madre. Después de un exhaustivo estudio, los resultados demuestran que las mujeres esclavas africanas eran el grupo más vulnerable, debido a que eran afectadas física y psicológicamente por la esclavitud. Además, a través del análisis de la novela *A Mercy* (2008), hemos visto cuántas de estas mujeres tenían que "vender" a sus propios hijos para evitarles el mismo cruel y duro futuro.

**Palabras clave:** esclavitud afroamericana, madres esclavas africanas, maternidad, pérdida maternal.

## INTRODUCTION

A considerable amount of literature has been published on African slavery. These studies have shown the terrible physical effects of slavery systems on African slaves. In fact, African slavery was extremely large, involving millions of human beings. Many of these studies have paid special attention to the way in which African people were held as slaves simply because of the color of their skin, and how they were sold and transported during the Middle Passage, from Africa to the so-called “New World.” In addition to that, these studies have shown the harsh and cruel conditions in the plantation systems, the way they lived in the slave-worked plantations and how they were mistreated. However, little attention has been devoted to the psychological effects of slavery on African slaves, especially concerning those African women who were forced to separate from their children. Unfortunately, slavery knew no age or sex, and African women were the most vulnerable group of slaves. The theme of motherhood permeates contemporary renderings of slavery in neo-slave narratives in US. According to some critics, the connections between mothers and children assume central importance due to two different reasons: on the one hand, this subject had been long neglected by many black male authors and, on the other, “legacy and responsibility became especially urgent in the context of motherhood” (Fontes de Oliveira, 2015: 68).

Women and girls comprised nearly a third of the African slaves brought to the English colonies. In general terms, black women were neither associated with femininity or beauty, nor motherhood. They were considered an essential part in the transmission of their culture in their homelands, but on plantations this concept disappeared. Besides torture and punishments, African slave women suffered sexual abuse and many of these meetings between master and slave ended with children who were not accepted. The majority of these women could not exercise their legitimate right as mothers and, although the masters were the fathers of their children, these women had to see how they sold them.

Concerning this aspect of motherhood and maternal loss, Toni Morrison shows readers the complexity of being a mother in her novels, especially a slave mother. These black women had no legal protection, no freedom, and no rights. They were forced to abandon their children who would have their same destiny (Morgenstern, 2016: 8-9). For this reason, the aim of this essay is to analyze the psychological effects of maternal loss in the novel *A Mercy* (2008) by Toni Morrison through the character of Florens, the

daughter of an African slave woman. My contribution to this theme is focused on three main ideas. Firstly, I think that Morrison develops this theme of motherhood and maternal loss in the novel in order to show that slavery has other effects, not only physical ones, as we tend to center upon. So, I will analyze the psychological effects of maternal loss, one of the terrible effects of slavery. Although many critics have written about that, an in-depth analysis is still needed. Secondly, I will study the importance of surrogate mothers and other mothers in the novel, such as the case of the character of Lina who helps Florens, and the character of Sorrow who, for many critics, is inexistent but she is also a mother. Thirdly, my contribution also supports the idea that, although the character of Lina is presented as a good surrogate mother in the novel, she unconsciously reinforces the rejection of Florens towards her mother.

The reason why I have decided to talk about motherhood and maternal loss in African American slavery has to do with the fact that when we think about slavery, we tend to imagine how slaves were transported during the Middle Passage, the conditions they faced in the slavery system, how they were mistreated and the punishments they received only because they were black people. We know that, in general terms, women and children are the most vulnerable people in any field. But, in relation to women and especially black mothers in slavery, they lived the same cruelty as the rest of the slaves, but with an added problem. They were separated from their children and all women who are mothers know how hard this can be. In the course of my compulsory and post-compulsory studies, this issue of slave mothers was not thoroughly explored. Therefore, I have chosen one of the best writers in my opinion, Toni Morrison, to analyze and highlight the importance of this topic in literature. With the novel *A Mercy* (2008), readers learn about the despair, the agony, the suffering, the impotence of all those slave mothers; slave mothers who had to experience it simply because they were viewed differently by white people who felt superior, and they were not treated as human beings.

In order to develop all these ideas throughout this essay, first of all, I will provide a background about African slavery. In this background we will see how African slaves were depicted, how they were transported from their homes to the plantations and the hard conditions they had to face there. Second, I will especially focus on women slaves and the physical and psychological abuses they suffered, mainly after the separation from their children. Third, I will take into account this information about slave mothers in order to analyze the topic of motherhood and maternal loss in *A Mercy* (2008). In

order to pursue this topic in this novel, I will use primary and secondary sources, including some significant fragments from *A Mercy* (2008).

## **THE BACKGROUND OF SLAVERY: FROM AFRICA TO THE “NEW WORLD”**

Drawing from historical records, it has been proved that slavery has always existed. It was accepted in old societies such as Mesopotamia, China, Rome and India, for instance. However, African slavery was totally different from the rest of enslaving systems. The reason why African slavery was so different is that the enslavement of Africans was extremely large, involving millions of human beings (12-15 estimated millions), who were held as slaves simply by virtue of their race, by the color of their skin, in the advent of modernity. The capture of some twelve million captives on the coast of Africa between 1500 and 1870 helped to make possible the construction of one of the largest systems of slavery in human history (Lovejoy, 2005: 1-2).

African people were considered less than human beings and ‘uncivilized.’ Not every black was a slave, but most Africans were, and on this assumption every black person would be treated like a slave, unless they could prove their free status and even then, they would still be treated worse than white colonists (Walvin, 1996: 16). The reason for this enslavement of Africans was economic. African slavery was intimately connected with the colonial expansion in North America and the Caribbean. The success of the colonies depended on the production of several key products such as tobacco, cotton, rice and sugar. So, workforce was needed for quite hard work. The solution for that demand of key products was blacks, African slaves, who became the principal labour force on those plantations and offered a great commercial potential. They were also regarded as a cheaper, more plentiful labour and more productive source than indentured servants (Walvin, 1996: 13).

The first English settlement with predominantly slave-worked plantations was established in 1630 in Northern America. On this and other plantations, slaves were treated as subhuman; they were sold like animals to become slaves there. Slaves were seen as simply domesticated animals and they were associated with anything dirty, impure and sinful. White people thought that Africans were docile and submissive by nature. In fact, the stereotype of black people was “weak, easily subdued, [with] dispositions so gentle and affectionate; they had an instinctive feeling of obedience to the stronger will of the White man, good-tempered, unintellectual, incapable of

civilization, and unfit for amalgamation” (Blassingame, 1972: 136). Both men and women were accustomed to agricultural labor in Africa and knew the existence of slavery. For this reason, white people believed that slavery in America would be “easy” for them (Blassingame, 1972: 10).

However, the journey from Africa to America was long and difficult. Once on the coast, slave traders sold African slaves to European merchants. After the sale, they were taken to the slave ship to start the so-called “Middle Passage” that lasted from three weeks to more than three months. The Middle Passage is presented as the most traumatic moment in the entire slave trade and the Atlantic crossing as “a voyage of death,” where injustice, cruelty and brutality were unimaginable. Many of the slaves committed suicide through their voyage, because they did not have a proper diet and the hygienic conditions were inexistent (Blassingame, 1972: 6-8).<sup>1</sup> Besides, the brutalities they suffered at the hands of their white captors could not be justified in the history of mankind. The slave ship became a violent and cruel vehicle for a massive international movement of people from Africa to America. Those people were forced to ‘forget’ their language, customs, names, cultures and, ultimately, their identities. For colonists, all these aspects were not important (Walvin, 1996: 50-52).

Moreover, it is very shocking the way slaves were transported. They were kept in the hold of the ship, chained to each other with iron shackles. Over a million and a half captives died and were thrown overboard during the Middle Passage between Africa and the New World, and once in the New World, between a tenth and a fifth of the slaves died within a year. During the journey, sometimes they were let go of their chains and forced to dance and sing. But their songs only showed death, sadness and melancholy. Walvin wrote: “Music provided slaves with a cultural link to the world they had lost. Whites encouraged slaves to sing, dance and play” (1996: 41). Blassingame also pointed out that music and storytelling was very important for Africans, because their songs and tales maintained their roots alive. These songs “told of the slave’s loves, work, floggings, and expressed his moods and the reality of his oppression” (1972: 50). We can read many hair-raising statements about this Middle Passage from blacks who were brought, dragged by force, taken from their home to become slaves in a country totally unknown for them, which people called “The New World.” When the ship arrived on the American coasts, slaves were allowed some days

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<sup>1</sup> For more information, see the article “The Determinants of Slave Mortality Rates on the Middle Passage” by Raymond L. Cohn and Richard A. Jensen.

to recover from the hardships of the crossing. Finally, fear, hunger, beatings, atrocities in general, would be the daily bread in the life of those poor unfortunate slaves. Hugh Brogan wrote: "Slavery frustrated the desires and abilities of the blacks; it perverted the whites. When slavery vanished, no one mourned it for long" (1985: 289). For black people, slavery meant sorrow, degradation, insecurity, and frustration, a system from which it was very difficult to escape.

African people were selected for the development of lands where they would have no voice or vote. Once arrived on the plantations, the conditions were not better than they had been during the Middle Passage. Theodore Dwight Weld mentions that slaves were allowed to work in gangs. They were driven to work long hours at an intense rhythm. The average work was 18 hours a day. The working of the slave system was destructive and oppressive. Slaves were overworked. They were forced to work in the field, long hours without rest and in terrible conditions. They worked days and nights and the hours in the field became even harder due to the deprivation of food and sleep and the abuses and punishments they received (2011: 69-117). Now, we are going to focus on some difficulties they faced and their situation when they arrived on the plantations. We are going to support these ideas with some testimonies recorded by Theodore D. Weld.<sup>2</sup>

For example, in relation to diet, it was scarce. The necessity of food is basic and universal to continue living, so we cannot comprehend the inhumanity of those masters who punished their slaves without eating. Almost all slaves were underfed. The only food that many of them ate throughout the day was the crumbs of bread that fell from the table of their masters. Slaves only ate corn and sometimes they could use salt with it. And at Christmas, some owners allowed their slaves to eat some meat. In addition to the bad quality of the food of the slaves, its quantity was miserable. They were allowed to eat a peck of corn per week (2011: 72). We can find many testimonies about the inhumane situation of slaves in relation to their diets.

Regarding the way of living, slaves lived in huts not far from the master's home. These huts had one apartment and no floors. Slaves were thrown together in the huts without distinction between men and women and family relationships. These huts had not windows, doors, tables or chairs (2011: 46-47). Moreover, many of the slaves died

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<sup>2</sup> Theodore Dwight Weld was an American abolitionist who wrote a very influential book in the formative days of the abolitionist movement: *American Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (2011). This book includes an interesting section, "Personal Narratives," to consult and learn all about testimonies that deal with the condition of slaves and the horrors of African slavery.

when bad weather was approaching and they did not have anything to cover them. Concerning clothing, slaves would be given one pair of shoes and three items of underwear a year. Although these and other clothing would be provided by their owner, they were often ill-fitting and made of coarse material (2011: 47-48). William Ladd, Esq, formerly a slaveholder in Florida, said about the huts of the slaves:

The dwellings of the slaves were palmetto huts, built by themselves of stakes and poles, thatched with the palmetto leaf. The door, when they had any, was generally of the same materials, sometimes boards found on the beach. They had no *floors*, no separate apartments, except the guinea negroes had sometimes a small inclosure for their god house. These huts the slaves built themselves after task and on Sundays (cited in Weld 2011: 109).

It is also extremely disturbing to think about the size of those huts. In relation to this, Mr. William Leftwich, a native of Virginia, said: “The dwellings of the slaves are log huts, from 10 to 12 feet square, often without windows, doors, or floors, they have neither chairs, table, or bedstead” (cited in Weld 2011: 110). These statements show how slaves lived in an incomprehensible and unimaginable situation for us today.

Besides, masters subdued their slaves and could do whatever they wanted with them. James Ramsay shows that the punishments were very different and for different reasons. A slave could be punished for resisting slavery, not working enough according to his/her master, using his/her native language, stealing, attacking or killing a white man or trying to escape. If a slave committed any of those crimes, the punishment was imminent. Among the most common punishments, a slave could be chained, whipped severely in public or be hanged and let him/her die there. The more severe the crime they committed, the more inhumane the punishment they received. There was also heavy mortality rate among slaves, very low rates of fertility for the women, and a subsequent need for even greater supplies of new slaves from Africa (2013: 85-86). It was prohibited for them to learn to read and write, and their behavior and movement were monitored and restricted. We have to mention that, although slaves could marry, their marriages had no legal validity and women servants were not free to marry, unless they had their owners' permission. Moreover, many masters took sexual liberties with slave women, and rewarded obedient slave behaviour with favors, while rebellious

slaves were brutally punished. Sometimes, slaves had permission for recreation. The most popular pastime among them was dancing (Brogan, 1985: 291-292).

Masters often delegated responsibility to hired overseers. The best overseer was the one who produced the largest number of cotton or sugar hogsheads per slave. For this reason, slaves were overworked and punished to get as much as possible. It is very interesting to know that many of the overseers or people who were with them were African people.<sup>3</sup> We can see that in the tv serie *Roots* (2016), which is based on Alex Haley's 1976 novel, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*. In some scenes from this tv series, we can see how the protagonist, Kunta Kinte, is mutilated by other black people who were looking for him. For all these reasons, we can say that “slavery wasted generations of talent and energy” in exchange for wealth, welfare and social position of a few (Brogan, 1985: 291).

### **THE MOST VULNERABLE SLAVES: BLACK MOTHERS**

Unfortunately, slavery knew no age or sex. From very young, between the ages of six and ten years, children were trained as field hands doing odd chores, picking stones, delivering water, etc. These jobs depended on the strength, sex, whim or economic necessity. Meanwhile, women slaves nursed and raised their white masters' children. Women and girls comprised nearly a third of the African slaves brought to the English colonies in the seventeenth century. Black women raised their daughters within a historical, social, political, and psychological context that could not ignore the effects of racial and gender oppression (Lawrence and Roberts, 2012: 2).<sup>4</sup>

Slave women generally commanded a lower price than slave men as they were obliged to work in the fields. This was less common for women servants, who were generally occupied with tasks in or near the household. Women were also seen as physically and intellectually inferior to men. The enslaved women were the most vulnerable group of people, because they were not only exposed to deprivation of food, long and hard work days but also sexual violence. Sexual assault was the norm for

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<sup>3</sup> In some scenes from the film *Django Unchained* (2012), we can see that Calvin Dandie, a slaveholder, has a servant black man who mistreats other black people to please his master. This black servant is very cruel with the rest of slaves, although he is also a slave but in a high position.

<sup>4</sup> For more information, see Everet alt, Joyce E., Laverne D. Marks, and Jean F. Clarke-Mitchell. "A Qualitative Study of the Black Mother-Daughter Relationship: Lessons Learned about Self-Esteem, Coping, and Resilience."

enslaved women. For them, slavery meant rape. Sexual and racial violence functioned as a tool for coercion and control submission. Women were exposed to constant sexual and physic abuses by their masters. Their bodies were used not only as pleasurable objects, but also to produce more slaves. The infants produced by raped women slaves were considered worthwhile investments. If they resisted, the consequences were worse (Lawrence and Roberts, 2012: 241-243).

So, many of the meetings between master and slave had consequences such as the birth of many mulatto children who were illegitimate and were not accepted, even by the other black people, due to the color of their skin. Moreover, many of these women had to see how her master sold their children in markets as if they were animals. Slave mothers did not have any right over themselves or their children, because they were considered mere merchandise (Lawrence and Roberts, 2012: 243). An illustration of this infamous practice can be seen in the book *The History of Mary Prince* (1997) when Mary Prince says:

At length the vendue master, who was to offer us for sale like sheep or cattle, arrived, and asked my mother which was the eldest. She said nothing, but pointed to me. He took me by the hand, and led me out into the middle of the street, and, turning me slowly round, exposed me to the view of those who attended the vendue. I was soon surrounded by strange men, who examined and handled me in the same manner that a butcher would a calf or a lamb he was about to purchase, and who talked about my shape and size in like words--as if I could no more understand their meaning than the dumb beasts. (4)

This description is quite shocking and although it seems incredible, it was a usual fact, one of millions. Unfortunately, slave women occupied the lowest position and the worst place among the rest of the slaves.<sup>5</sup>

It is very interesting to bring to the fore the conception of African Women in relation to sexuality, pregnancy, fecundity, fertility and motherhood. Barbara Bush makes an exhaustive study about the African woman as a mother and then as a slave with her children. From the beginning of her article, she highlights that “African mothers were central to transmit family memory and the culture and values of their

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<sup>5</sup> Another enlightening source about the role of black women as mothers and slaves on plantations can be found in “Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves” by Angela Davis.

communities and enslaved women carried this knowledge through to the plantation” (2010: 69). The African mother had a relevant role as protector for her family. However, it changed when they became slaves. She points out that “enslaved women were ‘stripped of their sex’ and denied motherhood and mothers had their children taken away as captives” (2010: 69; author’s emphasis). In their new ‘homes’ on plantations, the slave mothers gave birth to their children in traumatic conditions, because they knew that their children would become slaves like them.

African women were not associated with beauty in Eurocentric ideology; on the contrary, Europeans emphasized black women’s muscular, masculine build and sub-human traits (2010: 71). And these same characteristics were related to African women who gave birth to their children: “They were assumed to be physically robust and allegedly gave birth easily, with the same ease as animals and without much pain, an assumption perpetuated in plantation societies” (2010: 72). However, this thought was very far from the truth as many studies have demonstrated that the absence of anesthesia, medical attendance led to the fact that “African women have some of the highest maternal mortality in the world” (2010: 73).

Thus, the image of the African mother related to motherhood and fecundity is disrupted during the Middle Passage, which resulted in the fact that many of these women lost their identity as fecund mothers to procreate the lineage. Once arrived on the plantations, they were forced to go back to work soon after birth and infants spent long hours in the care of nannies, usually old women. Angela Davis wrote about these black mothers who had to leave their children in the care of other slaves and cited one situation narrated by Moses Grandy, an African-American enslaved man who became a writer and abolitionist:

On the state I am speaking of, those women who had sucking children suffered much from their breasts becoming full of milk, the infants being left at home. They therefore could not keep up with the other hands: I have seen the overseer beat them with raw hide, so that the blood and milk flew mingles from their breasts. (1994: 9)

Pregnant women had to do the normal agricultural work or they could expect the floggings workers received as a punishment. However, enslaved mothers adopted numerous strategies to protect their children. Many of them ran away or became

concubines of their masters to protect their children from being slaves like them and to give them freedom (Bush 2010: 83).

Naomi Morgenstern points out that “the rise of slave labor was accompanied by the gradual institutionalization and legal entrenchment of slavery in Virginia, beginning with a 1662 law passed in response to doubts about the status of children got by any English man upon a negro woman.” In addition, the law declared: “[A]ll children borne in this country shal be held bond or free only according to the condition of the mother.” This ensured that the situation of the enslaved mother forced her children to be slaves like their mothers and to be excluded from civil status (2015: 12-13). White men considered black women as breeders and not mothers; they were valued in relation to their ability to give birth to children. For this reason, their creatures could be sold freely, as it was done with animals (Davis, 1994: 7).

Providing more information about this relationship enslaved mother-children, Fontes de Oliveira states that “as maternal bonds were constantly repressed and forbidden, motherhood became a site of empowerment for black women. Through motherhood, black women often find the possibility of resisting oppression by loving their children and being loved, while trying to ensure their survival at the margins of society” (2016: 71). Black mothers have been portrayed as exemplary mothers. They were associated with the black matriarch. Fontes de Oliveira also argues that “mothers of color choose to defy white slaves owners’ authority. Moreover, there are many possibilities within the concept of black mother because we can find mothers, surrogate mothers or othermothers” (2016: 70).

Taking into account all this information, I am going to analyze the novel *A Mercy* (2008), focusing on the theme of motherhood and maternal loss and its consequences through the characters of Florens, Sorrow and Lina.

## **MOTHERHOOD IN A *MERCY*: MATERNAL LOSS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS**

The Nobel-prize winning author Toni Morrison was born during the Depression in February 1931. According to *Encyclopedia Britannica*, the central theme of Morrison’s novels is the black American experience; in an unjust society her characters struggle to find themselves and their cultural identity. *A Mercy* (2008), written by Toni Morrison, is set in the seventeenth century and explores themes of racial and religious intolerance, exile and abandonment. The novel is about both the story of daughters and mothers

during African American slavery. The main character is Florens, a girl who was allegedly abandoned by her mother. Throughout the novel, readers notice how Florens is affected by this abandonment, which she cannot understand. At the end of the novel, Florens's mother has the chance to tell why she abandoned her daughter and Florens will not be the same again.

Concerning the theme of motherhood, on the one hand, Morgenstern analyzes this novel in relation to psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche's account of the relationship between a parent and a child. Laplanche states that all children are influenced by their parents' messages: "a child is inevitable seduced and traumatized by an adult world of unmasterable signifiers" (2014: 20).<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, Amanda Putnam investigates how characters in Toni Morrison's novels tend to be violent due to their oppressive environments, and this violence usually emerges during early childhood. These female characters choose violence to find an exit for their situations of racial domination. She focuses on "the maternal abandonment, either literal or emotional which is one common manifestation of these lessons in Morrison's texts, often resulting in child-driven violence. Regardless of whether the abandonment is intentional or desired, the child perception of being abandoned often drives the child to act out violently" (2011: 26).

Regarding the conception of other mothers, Fontes de Oliveira inquires into how Toni Morrison rewrites the experiences of black mothers during slavery and its aftermath in the United States and how motherhood assumes various forms in both novels. She explains that "many narratives tend to ignore mothers and focus on the daughters' experiences" (2016: 68). This author also points out that readers can find different notions of mothers in the novel such as Lina who becomes a surrogate mother. According to her, Toni Morrison in *A Mercy* goes beyond the stereotypical image of African-American women as impeccable and exemplary mothers. To support this idea, she writes: "[o]ther women, while not mothers themselves, are ship and safe harbor to children through the practice of othermothering" (2016: 80). So, following this information, I am going to analyze some fragments from *A Mercy* focusing on three main characters Florens, Sorrow and Lina and the effects of motherhood and/or maternal loss in each of them.

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<sup>6</sup> Jean Wyatt wrote an interesting article, "Failed Messages, Maternal Loss, and Narrative Form in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*," focused on the fact that the message of Florens's mother involves sexuality and, due to the fact that she was eight years old when her mother "sent" the message, she cannot understand it.

From the beginning of the novel it becomes obvious the degree to which our protagonist Florens is affected by her mother's denial and abandonment. At the beginning of the novel, Florens is going to tell a story about something that happened in her life. In the first pages, Florens makes mention of her mother and her little boy. She says: "If a pea hen refuses to brood I read it quickly and, sure enough, that night I see a minhamãe standing hand I hand with her little boy, by shoes jammig the pocket of her apron" (4). Throughout the novel, we notice that Florens is able to interpret the meaning of many natural occurrences which lead her to have dreams about her mother and her little boy. In this case, it is a pea hen, but in another moment, for example, she states: "I go there but the hens make nothing so I know a minha mãe is coming soon" (161). As we can see, female animals in the novel are very connected to her feeling towards her mother. Sometimes, this feeling is related to abandonment, and sometimes to protection. And after each of her interpretations, the same dream appears. This recurrent dream of her mother and her little boy will be repeated throughout the novel intermittently. Therefore, Florens is traumatized by the abandonment of her *minha mãe*. This abandonment was necessary as readers know at the end of the novel, but it clearly marked Florens's life and behavior. In fact, these words will be always in her mind and heart "take the girl, she says, my daughter, she says" (8). We can feel Florens's sorrow and anger in these words. We can also notice that every time Florens mentions her mother and her brother, she says her little boy, not her brother. Maybe this is because she feels that her mother chose her boy instead of her girl; her mother gave her up, not her brother. This fact of choosing between two children and being Florens the one who is abandoned will lead her to act in a violent way at the end of the novel, as I will analyze later.

Moreover, Florens also talks about images of other mothers with their children. For instance, at the end of the introduction of her story she says:

But I have a worry [...] but because mothers nursing greedy babies scare me. I know how their eyes go when they choose. How they raise them to look at me hard, saying something I cannot hear. Saying something important to me, but holding the little boy's hand. (9)

In this quote, we can feel her constant torment: everything is linked to her mother. She talks about "mothers who nurse babies," as her mother with her little boy when the

abandonment took place. And these mothers “say something she cannot hear” (9). Florens knows that her mother wants to tell her something important, but she only remembers that she was neither the chosen one nor the person who was saved, because her mother held a hand, but this hand was not hers.

Later, she narrates how Jacob Vaark went to D’Ortega’s house in order to charge a debt and when he wanted to buy Florens’s mother, D’Ortega refused it. For this reason, she knelt down and asked Vaark to take the girl with him: “please, Senhor. Not me. Take her. Take my daughter” (30). After this request, Jacob Vaark accepted it. It was something good for the girl, however like Florens, Jacob also understood that a mother was giving her daughter up. This was an act of mercy to remove a girl from a plantation of slaves. However, it was an act of a mercy that will unconsciously plunge Florens into a much worse bondage, that of her own mind.

The psychological effects of this abandonment affect Florens in several ways. One of these ways is in the realm of love. When a free blacksmith arrives at Jacob Vaark’s house, Florens falls in love with him. Little by little, without realizing it, she becomes his slave. Florens herself recognizes that “No holy spirits are my need. No communion or prayer. You are my protection. Only you” (81); or “I don’t want to be free of you because I am live only with you” (82); and even later “you are my shaper and my world as well. It is done. No need to choose” (83). I have decided to highlight these sentences, which are more than beautiful words used to express a love for a beloved. It is very interesting the fact that Florens says that she only needs the blacksmith to be happy and feel whole, but it is not true. It is a sick love which makes Florens become docile, because she says that she does not want to be free from him. In the novel, it is mentioned that this love is a “long and lethal sickness” (150). Later when Mistress needs the blacksmith, it is Florens who decides to place her life in danger in order to find him. Moreover, Florens also explains that she does not need to choose. The word “choose” is always in her mind. Her mother did not choose her and, at the end of her story, the blacksmith will not choose her. However, she wanted to be chosen; she wanted to be elected by her mother, but she was not and now she wanted to be selected by the blacksmith. It is intriguing how her mother wants Florens to be free; however, her act of abandonment, in a certain way, makes Florens a slave of love, of the necessity to be loved by someone. We can support this idea with some statements by the characters of Lina and Rebekka. Lina says about Florens: “she was deeply grateful for every shred of affection, any pat on the head, any smile of approval” (72) and Rebekka

states: “Jacob said the mother had no use for her which explained her need to please” (113). Both women recognize that Florens needs love, and as a child she wants to get it from every man or woman around her.

Another of the psychological effects of the abandonment on Florens is the feeling of rejection towards her mother. When she has dreams about her mother and her little boy, she knows that her mother wants to tell her something important; however, she does not want to hear it. This original rejection and the notion of not knowing what her mother wants to say to her causes great agony in her. This agony leads her, at the end of the novel, to act violently and lose everything she was fighting for. This is the last of the effects of the abandonment. The blacksmith leaves Florens with Malaik, an orphan boy, to cure Mistress. But, when he returns, he realizes that Florens has hurt Malaik. After that, the blacksmith throws Florens out of house. For her, it is the second abandonment in her life, “I am lost because you shout is not my name. Not me. Him. Malaik you shout. Malaik” (165). Florens feels rejected; once again the boy is chosen, not her and for this reason she acts violently at the end.

As I mentioned above, in the novel *A Mercy* we also find the role of surrogate mothers or other mothers through the characters of Sorrow and Lina. Firstly, I am going to analyze the character of Sorrow. Throughout the novel, Sorrow is always described contemptuously such as “stupid Sorrow (51); “an easy harvest” (52); “daft girl” (60); “useless” (63); even Lina thinks that Sorrow is cursed which provokes the death and the deterioration of everything around her. For instance, when the Mistress lost her children, Lina warned her that the origin of those deaths was Sorrow’s presence. Lina believes that “in Sorrow’s presence eggs would not allow themselves to be beaten into foam, nor did butter lighten cake batter” (65). However, none of the characters wonders about Sorrow’s past or tries to get to know her better, or understand why she acts like this. But, as readers, we know that her life was really difficult.

Sorrow lived on a ship with her father, the captain. The first time Sorrow landed in her life was when she was rescued from the ship as it was sinking and all the crew had died. After that, she lived in the house of a sawyer, where she was repeatedly mistreated and raped by the sawyer’s two sons. They did not know her name, so the wife of the sawyer named her Sorrow. Sorrow never said anything about her past or reacted to the abuses she was subjected to. Her only company was an imaginary friend who helped her face the problems and continue living. However, Sorrow, at that

moment, could not imagine that her name will change and her friend will eventually disappear forever.

At the age of eleven, Sorrow was sold to another house, this time the house of Jacob Vaark. There, she was considered useless and a curse, as I have mentioned. And it is there that Sorrow becomes a mother for the first time. People in the house did not know who her beloved could be, only that she usually became “the play for man” (115). When Sorrow gave birth to her first baby, Lina helped her in the birth. Later, Lina said that the baby was dead, but Sorrow never believed her: “it took years for Sorrow’s steady thoughts of her baby breathing water under Lina’s palm to recede” (145). In the novel, we cannot know if Sorrow’s baby was alive or dead, but we know that Sorrow was traumatized after this moment, always thinking about her lost baby. Maybe, Sorrow needed love due to her cruel past and her baby was a hope for her, but she could not reconcile to the fact that the baby was not alive.

After this death, Florens arrived at the house of Jacob Vaark but Lina immediately proclaimed that Florens belonged to her. Sorrow could not do anything about that, so she continued with her life until she gets pregnant again. This time, she did not want Lina or another person to help her, although Will and Scully would help her in the end. Sorrow gives birth to a beautiful girl and she feels completely happy. She recognizes that she did it by herself, something really important. Sorrow does not attend the chores of the house, when her daughter demands her. Sorrow is not the same woman anymore from the beginning of the story. In fact, Twin, her imaginary friend, is not with her anymore. Sorrow decides to change her name, now she would be Complete. And that is how she feels after being a mother, now she is full of happiness and her daughter is the center of her world. The fact that Sorrow changes her own name is very significant in the story, because she had gone through pain, suffering and had always let others handle her, but now she is in control of her life. Due to that, perhaps, we can say that Sorrow is the only true mother in this story, because she never abandons her girl and all her life evolves around her baby. In fact, she is the only biological mother in the novel who could exercise her legitimate right as such.

Finally, the character of Lina deserves critical attention, not only as a surrogate mother because she becomes Florens’s mother without being her biological one, but also as someone who unconsciously influences Florens to reject her own mother. In order to understand the character of Lina, we have to move to her Native American past. When she was a child, her small village was burnt by European people. Thus, she

became an orphan girl. Lina and other children who had been left in the same helpless situation took refuge among the trees and weeds. Lina says that one day some men came and rescued them. She did not know where they had taken the other children, but she was left among the Presbyterians. Lina worked hard among them, always being docile and kind. She was alone, the story mentions: “afraid of once more losing shelter, terrified of being alone in the world without family, Lina acknowledged her status as heathen and let herself be purified by these worthies” (55). However, later, she was finally abandoned by those people. This abandonment made her promise that she will never abandon anyone. Then, Lina was sold to Jacob Vaark’s household, where she became a friend of the Mistress. Lina had rejected Sorrow immediately, but then welcomed Florens, an orphan girl whose mother had abandoned her.

We can find many similarities between Lina and Florens. Both of them were abandoned by their family, they were alone in the world and they needed love. The promise that Lina made previously is very connected with the love that she poured on Florens. She did not want to abandon her like her mother, so she decided to take her place. In fact, she prohibited Sorrow to come close to Florens, declaring that Florens was hers. Florens needed love and Lina was decided to give it to her. In the novel we find an expression that is really significant, it says that Lina and Florens shared “mother hunger” (73). Lina needed to become a mother, maybe due to her infertility or her own necessity to love and be loved. She had not been able to enter into any fruitful relationship with a man, so she remained alone in this world when she found a ray of hope in the little Florens.

Soon enough, Lina became Florens’s mother. Lina, immediately, claims Florens as her own property and she does not allow anyone to hurt her. She taught her many things, to observe nature, to work hard, to be a good girl. Moreover, she worried like a real mother for Florens and wanted to protect her from all evil, whether it was Sorrow or the blacksmith himself. But the most important thing for Lina was to love Florens, and Florens herself found in Lina a real mother. Lina became an exemplary mother, who protects her children and gives them love. Everything was given by Lina and not by her biological mother, so Florens understood even better that her mother did not love her, did not choose her but Lina did. Lina also helps Florens to survive and she used to tell her many stories, but her stories make Florens think that her mother was not a true and good mother for her. Consequently, she does not want to hear her mother’s message to explain why she had to abandon her.

I am going to analyze a fragment in order to support this idea that Lina unconsciously made Florens reject her mother even more firmly. In this fragment, Lina tells Florens a story about an eagle and her eggs: the story is about the way an eagle that laid her eggs in a nest far above and far beyond the snakes and anything that could harm them. The eagle never rests; she fiercely protects its future chicks, but she cannot defend them against the evil thoughts of man. One day, a traveler climbs a nearby mountain and contemplates everything that seems to be his. Everything belongs to him and that thought causes the eggs to begin to crack. When the eagle observes what is happening, she swoops down to claw away his laugh and his unnatural sound. But the traveler raises his stick and strikes her wing with all his strength. Screaming, she falls and falls.

Lina used to tell Florens many stories, but this in particular made Florens think. From this story, Florens could conclude that good mothers are like that eagle that does everything possible to protect their children from predators, even giving her own life for them. In real life, we may consider Florens as one of those eggs, her mother as the eagle and the predator as Jacob Vaark. From Florens' point of view, her mother did not protect her and left her in the hands of the predator, Vaark, so she may conclude that *minha mãe* was not a good mother. From *minha mãe's* point of view, she protected Florens from the predator, like the eagle in the story, Mr. Ortega. In order to protect her, she had to give her away to someone who would care for her. Unfortunately, Florens was very small when she was sold, so she did not fully understand her mother's act of sacrifice. That is why we can deduce that, telling this story of mothers who protect their children offering their lives for them, Lina is somehow increasing the rejection of Florens towards her mother because she did not fight for her own daughter, according to her.

However, at the end of the novel, we know that *minha mãe's* actions were guided by protection. As Jacob Vaark realized, she was not a mere slave to Mr. Ortega. She was constantly abused by him and she realized that her daughter would be his next victim. She wanted to prevent her daughter's rapes and sexual abuse; so, when she saw that Jacob did not trade in slaves, she took the opportunity, the blessing she had so much hoped to give to her daughter. She wanted her to be free and only this gentleman would give her the key to do it. It was only an act of mercy. Florens's mother remembers this every day, and finally she can say what she wanted so much to say to Florens:

It was a mercy. Offered by a human. I stayed on my knees. In the dust where my heart will dream each night and every day until you understand what I know and long to tell you: to be given dominion over another is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing. (195-196)

Her *minha mãe* wanted to prevent Florens from her same destiny and to be dominated by a cruel slaveholder who abused her constantly. Thanks to the act of mercy by Jacob Vaark, Florens could be released from that slavery system. However, Florens became a slave of love and it led her to act violently until the end of the story when she learns to be free. For this reason, she “scratches” the walls of a room to shout her story, to materialize her freedom. Moreover, this fact involves maturity, change, especially psychological one, and resistance. Firstly, as a black slave woman, she was not allowed to learn to read and write, so this shows rebellion and resistance to the slavery system. And secondly, she writes the wall of a room in Jacob Vaark's house, although it was forbidden for her. Doing it, her life is in danger but she is firmly decided to give voice to her harsh experiences and to a system in which women have to keep quiet.

## **CONCLUSION**

After the exhaustive analysis of several kinds of sources about African American slavery, giving special attention to black slave mothers, we can conclude that slavery is a system to be avoided at all costs. There have been many kinds of slavery, but we can say that African American slavery is one of the most relevant slavery systems throughout human history. For a society allegedly free of racism, discrimination and slavery, it is very difficult to understand how white people argued that they were created superior by God, with the right to govern, enslave, mistreat and even kill people only because of their race and skin color. With every harsh punishment and lashing, African slaves were forced to forget their languages, roots, homelands and names, “wasting” human lives, promising futures, intelligence, and wisdom. Unfortunately, the physical consequences were not the only ones that affected African slaves, but also psychological ones which disturbed them for the rest of their lives. Regarding that, especially black slave women were the most psychologically mistreated group, because they were separated from their children and, therefore, they were not allowed to

exercise their legitimate right as mothers. Moreover, black slave women could not provide their children with education and a better future, and they had to see how white people mistreated, punished and raped their children; something very difficult for a mother. Due to that, some mothers were forced to “sell” their own children as an exit from slavery, producing psychological effects on the mothers and their children who felt a necessity to love and being loved. However, slavery could never make those mothers forget their children.

Immersing ourselves in the story written by Toni Morrison in *A Mercy* (2008), my analysis has showed everything that history proves. However, I would like to take a step forward, because it is not only important to have knowledge about African American slavery, but also to be aware that no one should be considered inferior to another person because of his/her race, skin color, roots or culture. Although there is still a long way to go, studies on slavery and, especially on its effects on African slave women, can help other people to avoid the same mistakes of the past. Concerning that, Toni Morrison not only revives the pain of slavery, but also makes her readers aware of the importance of rejecting racial discrimination and, above all, the importance of continuing, unfortunately still nowadays, the struggle to exterminate it.

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