

Means of Conversing with the Other: History and Memory in Toni Morrison's Fiction

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Abstract:

The present research is a reading of Toni Morrison's novels meant to emphasize the relation between historical reality and memory to deal with otherness in the racist, segregationist, and social, sexist environment of twentieth-century white America. Her novels deal with the historical reality of the black family. They serve as memories for the present, and future generations as the writer's true mission is to preserve and recall the past of the men and women of her people. The characters' memories can be repressed or forgotten. In contrast, the collective memory (family, religious, or social group memory) can be shared with the community and shape their identity. Her novels tell the story of the blacks as a commodity. It is the story of slavery and the slave trade and their undeniable impact on the future development of the former slaves. By writing about slavery with all its range of injustices, Morrison opens the dialogue with the other. Slavery, based on the exploitation of the weak, particularly blacks, by the whites who hold economic and political power, is put to trial in Morrison's novels. Writing about slavery would not provoke or nourish resentment but ask that this injustice never be repeated.

Keywords: slavery, identity, memory, Morrison (Toni), *Beloved*, *A Mercy*, triangular trade

Introduction: The Historical reality of the black family

Toni Morrison's work recalls the history of the African American community from its departure from Africa in slavery until it arrived in America, where children, mothers, and fathers were separated and left for different destinations. This phenomenon thus created two different stories: one of the black people left behind in Africa and another of those brought to America. Her work is based mainly on slavery and segregation endured by millions of African Americans on the plantations and after their liberation. Her novels are directly or indirectly linked to slavery which rhymes with injustices and humiliations inflicted on the many African Americans living as a minority in a predominantly white America. Morrison's character still lives on the fringes of society and seeks to create his own story to continue to exist. Despite the many difficulties in his career, he wants to start or be closer to a family he has

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lost in advance. In the opinion of Walter R Allen, references to family upheavals are very numerous in literature, primarily African-American, such as the references to “family disorganization”, the “underclass”, “culture of poverty”, and “the Black matriarchy”. Such references are often misleading because,

the issue is not wholly reducible to whether Black families should be cast as good or bad, positive or negative. Both views pursued to an extreme tamper with reality, become stereotypic, and ultimately dehumanize Black families. In the most fundamental sense, life is a collage of good, bad, and indifferent; so, too, is Black family life (Allen, 1995: 571).

Allen alludes to the destructuring of black families, which is very present in African American literature as a historical fact linked to slavery. For example, in Morrison’s work, the family crisis is present everywhere. It means that each family can live its own story even if they can all come together around a common point: living as marginalized in America.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Cholly Breedlove’s widely dispersed family experiences a profound crisis where the often-drunk Cholly fights with his wife and commits an act of incest by impregnating his daughter, Pecola Breedlove. This fact reflects a historical reality where the notion of incest does not exist among slaves often forced to mate with partners chosen by the masters.

Also, in *Sula*, the Peace family lives a troubling situation. Beyond the standoff between the different members, three ladies live alone in their house. Sula’s grandmother, Eva Peace, is abandoned by her husband, BoyBoy, who leaves her with three children, including Hannah Peace, Sula’s mother. This situation testifies to a real family crisis and contributes to the weakening of the family, which is sinking increasingly into total turmoil.

In addition, in *Song of Solomon*, the distraught black family encounters all kinds of difficulties passed down from generation to generation. Its difficulties are often linked to the racism which is rampant in the southern part of the United States, making its members the victims of cruel and tragic acts. The trivial death in this novel also refers to a period of slavery where the white master allows himself the power to kill for any reason.

We should also note that in *Beloved* and *A Mercy*, Morrison shows the profound family crisis black families experienced on American plantations as slaves. In *Beloved*, she shares the story of Sethe, who kills her eldest daughter to save her from slavery and the atrocities and humiliations inflicted by the white masters. In *A Mercy*, Florens’ mother

involuntarily chooses to separate from Florens to prevent separation from her young boy.

The same problem of family crisis is also observed in *Paradise*, where both the dispersal of families and the problem of identity arise, and the assassinations suffered by the African American community are often linked to racism. In the novel *Home*, the family fabric is torn apart as the black family, mainly Frank Money's homeless, lives scattered like homeless people, as seen during slavery.

It should be understood from this idea of family breakdown that shakes African Americans that Morrison is not an isolated author of her society. Her works reflect the historical reality of the black community in the United States. The question that can be asked is: What is Morrison looking for in drawing inspiration from the history of the African American community in her fiction? Does she want to reinvent history, rewrite it, or preserve it not to be forgotten? In other words, do her works serve as a duty of remembrance or testimony to the history of the black American community?

These questions point to a deeper understanding of the past of the black community in the United States. Morrison's novels undoubtedly serve as memories for present and future generations because that is, in reality, the true mission of the writer: to preserve and recall the past of men and women.

The burden of memory

Humanity's past is preserved and remembered through historical documents often well designed by historians or orally, that is, the transmission of facts and events by word of mouth. However, it is not only historical documents to preserve or recall history. Regarding Morrison's fiction, we realize that literature also plays a role in preserving and recalling past facts and events. Therefore, the literary work can be conceived as a memory that seeks to preserve historical facts.

However, the first step is to define memory. What is a memory? Generally, memory is a function of psychic faculty by which we remember, recognize and represent the past as the past. Memory can be individual when it involves a single being or collective when it involves a whole group of individuals who remember a past event. We can thus speak of individual memory or collective memory.

In Morrison's work, we can see both the presence of individual memory and collective memory. In her novels, each character lives a historical moment that he or she often seeks to repress, which is so painful for him/her. From Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* via Milkman in *Song of Solomon*, Sethe in *Beloved*, the nine women of the

convent in *Paradise*, Florens and her mother in *A Mercy* to Frank Money in *Home*, to arbitrarily name only a few. Each has a story that they seek to keep from their thinking, but collectively they all have memories to share with the rest of their groups.

In Toni Morrison's literary work, we see the presence of small groups of affiliations and an apparent desire to rediscover or safeguard their identity. *Song of Solomon* perfectly illustrates this reality, with Milkman digging deep into his family history to find his closest relatives. Also, in *Beloved*, Baby Suggs calls the African American community around the clearing to ask them to nurture a sense of love to oppose whites' hatred.

We should also note that if the collective memory refers to small groups of belonging, we can speak of family, religious memory, and the memory of social groups, all of which can be found in Morrison's literary work. So, it will be a question of seeing the relationship between history, memory, and literature. Based on Morrison's fiction, we conclude that these three notions are inseparable and that none can advance without the other two.

In her novels, Morrison creates characters very attached to their pasts whom they seek to remember, draw closer to their social groups, or suppress to reassure their tiny minds. The relationship between history, memory, and literature is comparable to that between the past, the present, and the future. Note that there is always a past in the present and a present in the future. As a result, Morrison's character lives the present under the influence of the past that he/she mostly represses to face the future better. Because of history, he/she is often faced with a terrible economic situation to which the text does not fail to relate.

Since her strength lies in writing, which she uses as a political medium, Morrison wants to edit new historical pages with everyone's participation. In this new vision, does she begin to rewrite American history, including that of her community, before moving towards the universal? Much social evidence points to corroborating her plan to rewrite history. By creating, for example, in *Paradise*, the city of Ruby as a black city, she wants to revalue African Americans' history to include it in the national archives. Also, the name of Not Doctor Street given to a street in *Song of Solomon* is a way of commemorating and integrating black history into that of America. Still, in the same vein, Morrison highlights slavery in *Beloved* and *A Mercy* to make visible the economic contribution that blacks have made to the development of American capitalism despite the many misadventures they have encountered on the plantations.

Writing is, therefore, for Morrison, a political means that does not involve a deadly confrontation between two parties. It is a way for her to

fight against the erection of classes that promotes and perpetuates violence. Through her novels, she shows how man must transcend all material values by drawing inspiration from universal values much more helpful to live, such as love, dignity, solidarity, hospitality, and a sense of community.

History and Fiction

Morrison's fiction is inseparable from the history of African Americans. This reality is all the more valid because it deliberately refuses to make all its central characters black. For her writing highlights the suffering of vulnerable layers, there is no reason she should specifically speak about another issue different from that of the black community living for a long time in a racist, segregationist, and sexist social environment. Thus, through her fiction, she goes back further to tell the story of slavery and the slave trade, which remained two unforgettable periods on the historical agenda of blacks in America.

In one way or another, Morrison's work continues to draw inspiration from the past, particularly from slavery and the slave trade. In her novels, these two questions are dealt with directly, as in *Beloved* and *A Mercy*, or indirectly in *The Bluest Eye*, *Song of Solomon*, *Paradise*, and *Home*. We find facts that only slavery or trafficking of slave girls can justify. Thus she links the past to the present to justify the present based on history.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Cholly Breedlove seeks to have blue eyes at all costs. It denotes a young girl excluded because of her racial affiliation who seeks to fit into the white majority to escape her isolation and loneliness. It is like the black slave who finds herself in an impassive situation because of her skin color. Whatever maneuver he does, he will always remain black and easily identifiable in the event of an escape. Cholly and the slave are doomed to accept their fates and live with them or perish and be forgotten like other blacks.

The homelessness plaguing Cholly's family, or even Frank Money's in *Home*, is a hallmark of slavery. Both families are excluded from their only house and end up on the street before being rescued by close relatives or people belonging to the same group. Through this aid, we also see the black solidarity that has always punctuated slavery, as in *Beloved*, where the black community acts as a shield to prevent Sethe from being hanged after she assassinated her daughter. Similarly, in *A Mercy*, a community of slaves on the farm of their master, Jacob Vaark, lives together as brothers and sisters.

The flight of nine families to *Paradise* is also an inspiration to slavery. This flight, which leads them to a convent, can symbolize slaves fleeing their enslavers and seeking to escape inhuman conditions of

detention to find freedom and happiness. Also, in *Song of Solomon*, Morrison is inspired by the story of men forced to abandon their partners forever when one refers to the story of Solomon leaving his wife and children for an unknown place as evidenced by this passage: “Everybody! He left everybody down on the ground, and he sailed on-off like a black eagle. O-o-o-o-o Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone / Solomon cut across the sky; Solomon gone home” (*Song of Solomon*: 328-329).

In addition, in this novel, we have Pilate’s family’s situation, which refers to slavery. Both Reba and Hagar ignore their fathers. This situation refers to a reality of slavery where the enslaved child often knows his mother without having an exact idea of his birth father. As sources of inspiration, slavery and the slave trade are thus present in Morrison’s fiction. We feel them either directly or indirectly. However, they are central to *Beloved* and *A Mercy*, where the author focuses on the historic arrival of blacks in America. It is expressed through trade, where the sons of the African continent are taken by force and sold to America. Historically this involves three continents: Europe, Africa, and America, which Morrison makes clear in *A Mercy* where Senhor D’Ortega, who is Portuguese by origin, travels to Africa to take Africans and sell them in America. The triangular trade with the sons of Africa as principal merchandise is a question. In other words, commerce is at the center of the institution of slavery, which endorses the superiority of the white race over the black race. It also legalizes the purchase of black by white. It is commercial capitalism whose most prized commodity remains black labor, bought cheaply to be sold and inhumanely exploited on American plantations. The slave trade or trade-in black by white was a source of inspiration for Morrison. She uses it to tell the story of her community, which has suffered discrimination and segregation for centuries. In her essay, “The Site of Memory” (1995), Toni Morrison writes:

For me – a writer in the last quarter of the twentieth century, not much more than a hundred years after Emancipation, a writer who is black and a woman – the exercise is very different. My job becomes how to rip that veil drawn over “proceedings too terrible to relate.” The exercise is also critical for any person who is black, or who belongs to any marginalized category, for, historically, we were seldom invited to participate in the discourse even when we were its topic (qtd. in Zinseer, 1995: 91).

Morrison seems to take a rebellious attitude in the face of white tyranny, which, by nurturing ethnocentric feelings, refuses black participation in discourse concerning them.

By evoking slavery and the slave trade in his fiction, Morrison seeks to break away from the many lies some white historians and writers told

on the other side. Through her fictional works, she participates in the rewriting and elaborating of the speech, which should not be the prerogative of the white intelligentsia. For example, in *A Mercy*, she draws inspiration from slavery to show the origin of American history where black and white, enslavers and enslaved people, all lived without racist barriers. At that time, slavery knew no racism; racism, on the other hand, was the result of slavery because it was profitable.

There were both black and white slaves, which is one way of proving that the claim that there are better men than others is a false assumption because, throughout America's history, all have known slavery. Also, by evoking these decisive moments in the history of America, Morrison began to dream of a promised land where people, like the slaves in *Jacob Vaark*, will love each other and stop judging themselves because of the color of their skin. They will thus be able to move on to questions more essential to life, such as solidarity, hospitality, and a sense of community.

By showing masters, like D'Ortega, who descend to Africa to buy blacks and sell them in America, Morrison implicitly seeks to prove that savagery is more to be found among those whites who, in the name of the economy, do not hesitate to dehumanize blacks. They compare them to animals that are only useful for breeding and farming, which leads to losing all their humanity.

Reading the story of Sethe, who murders her daughter, the reader is tempted by the idea of her inhumanity. However, when we dig deeper, it becomes evident that it is the master behind the leak of Sweet Home, in this case, the Schoolteacher, who is more inhuman. Even though she is physically frail, Sethe has exceptional moral capacities that allow her to transcend the reality of slavery. She refuses her children to return to the Sweet Home plantation run by Schoolteacher since Mr. Garner's death.

Through this assassination, Morrison is inspired by the true story of a slave, in the person of Margarite Garner, who, fleeing her masters to find freedom, preferred to end her daughter's life when she is caught. This part is the main event in *Beloved* because all the storytelling will revolve around it. That Morrison allows Sethe some choice between returning his children to Sweet Home and death is an essential point in her policy of giving back to the black man what is being tried to take away from him: his dignity. Morrison puts Sethe in a challenging choice position when Schoolteacher and his men come to 124 to bring her and her offspring back to the plantation, that is, slavery. Nevertheless, out of dignity, which some call pride, she kills her eldest daughter to make her avoid a possible return to servitude.

For Schoolteacher and the other white masters, it is essential not to restore black people to their dignity as ordinary individuals but rather to

flout it to take advantage of their physical strengths. For these whites, profit maximization is far more critical than any other consideration. Neither religion nor ethics channel them, and they indulge in illicit methods for profit. They ignore status, birth, religion, or race; all that is useful to them is the acquisition or maximization of profit.

Blacks as commodities

Blacks, who were objects for sale, in other words, commodities, were not concerned with democratic issues because they were underestimated. For example, while milking Sethe, “they stole it [Sethe’s milk]; after they handled me like I was the cow, no, the goat” (*Beloved*, 201), Schoolteacher sees in her the status of an animal. Schoolteacher annoys himself by addressing his nephews, “No, no. That’s not the way. I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don’t forget to line them up” (*Beloved*, 201). Again, Morrison shows the inhumanity of Schoolteacher. Even if he takes black people for subhumans, Schoolteacher struggles to prove it. Its position in this direction is justified only by its rush for profit. His predecessor Mr. Garner calls his slaves “men,” but his daily treatment of them shows otherwise. According to Peter J. Parish,

In the American South, as elsewhere, slavery rested upon a basic contradiction: Its guiding principle was that slaves were property but its everyday practice demonstrated the impossibility of living up to, or down to, that denial of the slave’s humanity. The master learned to treat his slaves both as property and as men and women, the slaves learned how to express their humanity even while they were constrained in much of their lives to accept their status as chattel (Parish, 1989: 1).

In *Beloved*, all black slaves are considered animals, meaning their masters can sell them without the approval of their parents. This situation can also be observed in *A Mercy*. According to some critics, this novel complements or continues *Beloved*. Both deal with common themes, but the most central is slavery, which comes with inhuman treatment. There are separations and family breakdowns on both sides for economic reasons.

In *A Mercy*, Senhor D’Ortega’s debt repayment to Jacob Vaark is tangible proof that the master cares exclusively about his profits while neglecting those of the slave. For D’Ortega, no matter what affection Florens’s mother has for her, the main thing is to pay off a debt by giving up a slave. This donation is at the origin of an irreparable family crisis insofar as not only does the mother of Florens separate from her daughter, but she will never be definitively forgiven for this act.

Like Sethe’s, the story of Florens’s mother is very harsh. She is faced with a difficult choice between her daughter, Florens, and her little

brother, a choice which is, in reality, constrained because made under conditions of servitude. By Jacob's magnanimity, she can designate who, between Florens and her boy, should part ways with her. She offers her daughter to repay the master's debt, and remorse for abandoning a child will forever haunt her conscience.

The same choice issue also arises in *Beloved* between Sethe and her daughter Beloved. Wanting to avoid returning to the slavery of her children, Sethe cuts her life short before being overtaken by this act eighteen years later. Sethe is very possessive of her offspring and wants to keep her at all costs. She refuses to see her sold to other masters to endure the same ordeals since birth.

Trade thus played a preponderant role in the two novels. While allowing whites to gain more profit, he destroyed the lives of blacks. We thus have the transatlantic trade better known as the Middle Passage, which, while impoverishing the economic and human potential of the African continent, has enriched the West. Morrison shows that entire wealth in America and Europe, like well-built homes and robust economies, was achieved through the slave trade. It became possible because of the endless, unfair, unworthy pursuit of profit or capital of the white masters. However, in large part, because of the greed of African citizens: "Africans are as interested in selling slaves to the Dutch as an English planter is in buying them. Rum rules, no matter who does the trading, Laws? What laws?" (*A Mercy*: 30-31). Through this sentence, Morrison defends the responsibility of Africans in slavery and the slave trade. For her, the latter is entirely responsible for what happened to their compatriots.

Morrison seems, in this sense, to draw a slight parallel between slavery at the dawn of African history and slavery in its early days in America. Neither form is based on racism, and meaning servitude ignored questions of identity. In Africa, only wealthy men like kings could afford to have slaves at their disposal. At that time, holding slaves was a sign of wealth. However, in the West, with the rush for profit, the holding of slaves takes on a different connotation. Instead, we are looking for it to increase our wealth. Thus, as long as blacks are taken for goods intended for sale in the Americas, legislators and religious officials remain silent, or do they legitimize this macabre phenomenon that instills fear and fear in the African continent. As defended in *A Mercy*,

By eliminating manumission, gatherings, travel and bearing arms for black people only; by granting license to any white to kill any black for any reason; by compensating owners for a slave maiming or death, they separated and protected all whites from all others forever (*A Mercy*: 10).

While the black story in *Beloved* and *A Mercy* revolves around slavery and the slave trade, which enables whites to acquire wealth,

Morrison shows a slightly different story in *Home*. It is no longer about black people sold for enrichment but those who work for their accounts. Compared to other novels dealing with slavery, this book shows the evolution of black history in America. Through *Home*, the situation has turned more or less for the better, as black people are now working for their enrichment, which is Morrison's way of putting power back into the hands of working African Americans, now to change or improve their living conditions.

Also, Morrison insists on the presence of the private sector to show its importance in a world in turmoil. This dialogue between Frank Money and Taylor is a testament to the power of African Americans to earn profit:

Probably. Say, you know a good place to eat and get some sleep in Chicago? I got a list here. You know anything about these places?

The waiter pursed his lips. "To eat go to Booker's diner", he said. "It's close to the station. For sleeping the YMCA is always a good idea. It's on Wabash. These hotels and what they call tourist homes can cost you a pretty penny and they might not let you in with those raggedy galoshes on your feet" (*Home*: 25).

Compared to a more or less distant past where he spent the night in the open air or worked on the full moon, the Negro in *Home* has the possibility of claiming a better life by renting a house for his family. He is no longer a slave or traded like an animal. For example, in *The Bluest Eye*, her story is slightly different from that of blacks in *Beloved* and *A Mercy*. He is presented as a free individual going through many hardships in an America that have become his place of origin, more racist and xenophobic than ever. We see in this novel the separation of ethnic groups, which is justified simply by a lack of integration and openness towards others. The black man, like Pecola Breedlove, seeks love and acceptance or recognition of his neighbor by wanting, at all costs, to have blue eyes like the white man.

Also, in *Song of Solomon*, Morrison alludes to black history, which is very much linked to slavery. The dispersal of the black family in this novel is simply one of the consequences of their history as descendants of slaves. If they do not know about slavery, perhaps after its abolition, their ancestors lived the painful moments of servitude because they were born. Today in the novel, they can afford, like Milkman, to search for their identities or origins. It should also be noted that their history is somewhat distinct from that of their ancestors in that they can, like Macon Dead the second, afford to work in the real estate industry. Unlike in the past, they can own anything by owning luxury cars and houses for rent. As in *Song of Solomon*, the slave past of blacks is also evoked in *Paradise*:

On the journey from Mississippi and two Louisiana parishes to Oklahoma, the one hundred and fifty-eight freedmen were unwelcomed on each grain of soil from Yazoo to Fort Smith. Turned away by rich Choctaw and poor whites, chased by yard dogs, jeered at by prostitutes and their children, they were nevertheless unprepared for the aggressiveness they received from Negro towns already being built (*Paradise*: 13).

The history of these blacks is so closely linked to slavery that they hardly imagine a free life or are surprised when they see one of their own becoming free. This lack of preparation is justified by the words of a slave who has just been freed: "They don't know we or about we", said one man. "Us free like them; was slave like them. What for is this difference" (*Ibidem*: 14).

Black history is also linked to the slave trade, which necessarily involves bringing to light several accomplices who, at first glance, agreed that they are inferior beings that should be transformed into commodities such as animals for sale in the market. We note the first complicity between buyers and sellers because if blacks have become slaves and belong to whites, it is primarily linked to the fact that there are suppliers and applicants.

The slave trade is a defining fact that greatly inspires Morrison's novels, especially *Beloved* and *A Mercy*. In *Beloved*, we have the personal story of Baby Suggs and his son Halle Suggs which involves the bond between seller and buyer. Indeed, Suggs and Halle are owned by Sweet Home, thanks to the perfect understanding between Mr. Garner as a buyer and a white seller. This mother and child were sold from Carolina Market, where Garner found them.

Another black person who has been traded there thanks to the complicity of the applicant bidder is also Sethe. Indeed, she was sold to Mr. Garner when she was very young, about thirteen to fourteen years old. His arrival at Sweet Home was a turning point in his life. There, she experienced the actual pangs of slavery, enduring great trials of excruciating humiliation. She is married to Halle with the connivance of the master, who, far from wanting to give her a better life, wants to increase his stock of slaves. Her marriage was precocious as she was only fourteen years old when her first child was born. It makes her an exhausted mother who has to take care of her child, housework, and the plantation simultaneously.

Another hardship or humiliation is inflicted on Sethe with the arrival of Schoolteacher as Mr. Garner's successor. Indeed, no character in Morrison is chosen at random; that of Schoolteacher symbolizing white cruelty is a way of asking whites to assume their historical responsibility fully.

Thus by highlighting the cruelty of Schoolteacher towards Sethe, for example, Morrison directs the debate not on the slaves but on the masters

who carry evil. Schoolteacher's turning Sweet Home into a hellish place may symbolize America as the original "promised land", which becomes a "lost paradise" due to white wickedness and indifference. This change of situation which makes Sweet Home go from heaven to hell is described by Charles Scruggs as "Sweet Home". The plantation in the South where the novel's significant characters begin is a garden for its owner, Garner (his name also symbolic), but finally a hell for those Blacks whom he was pleased to call 'men'" (Scruggs: 1993: 182).

Schoolteacher humiliation of Sethe is also one of the salient facts that pushes her to refuse the return to the slavery of her children, whom she seeks to protect against trade and separation. She does not trust anyone to take care of her offspring. She thus becomes possessive of her children, whom she wants to jealously guard, notwithstanding the attempts of Schoolteacher and his men to bring them back to Sweet Home.

Also, other slaves in *Beloved* were bought and sold through seller-buyer complicity. One of them is Paul D, who, through trade, has made the rounds to almost every market where enslaved people are sold. His physical strength and capacity for agricultural production made him a highly coveted commodity. At an early age, he was thus sold to Mr. Garner and then resold to another master whom he tried to kill in order to escape.

From a certain point of view, Paul D is the prototypical symbol of slavery and the slave trade. He knew several masters, planted a lot, sold in different markets, and fled from one plantation to another before sadly entering 124 at Sethe's in the hope of rest. However, even there, he faces an even more complex situation as he desperately battles an invisible spirit, that of *Beloved*, who was killed by his mother eighteen years ago and returning to not only claim love and affection. Nevertheless, she takes revenge on her mother, whom she calls a traitor and selfish.

Writing as a means of dialogue with the other

Questioned by Jane Bakerman (1977) about the reasons that prompted her to start writing, Toni Morrison gives two personal reasons: loneliness, and unhappiness. Here is her confession:

I never planned to be a writer. I was in a place where there was nobody I could talk to and have real conversations with. And I think I was also very unhappy. So I wrote then, for that reason. And then, after I had published, it was sort of a compulsive thing because it was a way of knowing, a way of thinking that I found really necessary (Bakerman, 1994: 30).

Writing for Morrison is a source of liberation, a way of knowing, and, above all, a means of genuine dialogue with others. Here the other involves all of his readers, especially her fellow Americans, for they are the primary targets of Morrison's work, primarily since it deals with

American issues. Failing to meet and talk to everyone, Morrison uses his quill to address others politically through strong messages held by his characters.

No characters in Morrison's work do not have their *raison d'être*. They all convey points of view that appeal to readers. For her, like any other writer, to write is to dialogue with others, share points of view, and try to understand the position of one's neighbor to find a happy outcome to any conflicting problem.

Thus, as an African American writer, Morrison deals with the issue of the black community in the United States concerning the white world from slavery to the present day. One of its main objectives is not to cultivate the grudge that history can create but to foster dialogue for understanding and perfect cohesion between communities. It is what makes Morrison's political discourse strong in *A Mercy*. By recounting the dialogue and mutual love between black and Indian enslavers and enslaved people, she seeks to update the story, which must be a source of positive inspiration for people today.

Through Jacob Vaark's farm, Morrison trivializes the difference in skin color, which should not be a blocking factor. By analyzing America today, we are easily convinced that the policy advocated by Morrison is gaining ground. In a predominantly white country, we are witnessing, for the first time, the election of a black president at the head of the United States, which is progress that could not have been hoped for just a few years ago. Today we are gradually moving towards the disappearance of specific racist considerations, even if there are still "hotheads" who refuse democratic progress. However, we must admit that at present, blacks enjoy much more respect and consideration accentuated by the accession of Barack Obama to the White House.

In the same way that the characters in *A Mercy* accept each other and have a deep love that prompts them to show solidarity in the face of any difficulty, Morrison calls on everyone to come together around shared values. She refuses to deal with details such as skin color and urges her readers to be inspired by this peaceful cohabitation between slaves and masters of distinct races.

A Mercy is not the only work where Morrison calls for the union of hearts. This call can be traced back to *Beloved*, with the incident between Sethe, an enslaved Black person giving birth in the woods, who is helped by Amy Denver, a white on her way to Boston. This story's beauty is that Sethe gives her daughter's name to this white girl she will never see again. It speaks to a profound mark of recognition that the reader should derive from this story.

By writing about slavery with all its range of injustices, Morrison opens the dialogue with the other. Indeed, in *Beloved*, just like *A Mercy*,

she puts slavery on trial based on exploiting the weak, particularly blacks, by whites who hold economic and political power. Writing about slavery would not provoke or nourish resentment but ask that this injustice never be repeated.

Alluding to D'Ortega, who values money, Morrison engages with today's capitalist who cares little for the well-being of his subordinates. Nowadays, we see more and more that people place much more importance on material goods than on human values like love and solidarity. Like D'Ortega, many bourgeois is ready to sacrifice their subordinates to make money, which questions their commitment to ethics. D'Ortega travels to the coasts of Africa to catch blacks and chain them without qualms to American plantations to sell them or put them to work to boost his economy. He has no mercy on his slaves, whom he views simply as tools of development rather than individuals to be treated with love and respect. His unethical attitude manifested itself in the way he treated Florens. Being very small, she is handled like a big person, able to bear all her burdens. As a slave, she does not enjoy any protection, not even that of her mother, as the history of shoes attests where she confesses:

The beginning begins with the shoes. When a child I am never able to abide being barefoot and always beg for shoes, anybody's shoes, even on the hottest days. My mother, a *minha mãe*, is frowning, is angry at what she says are my petrify ways. Only bad women wear high heels. I am dangerous, she says, and wild but she relents and lets me wear the throwaway shoes from Senhora's house, pointy-toe, one raised heel broke, the other worn and a buckle on top (*A Mercy*: 4).

If D'Ortega had considered Florens his own daughter, he would never have treated her with contempt. If he knew that showing sincere concern and admiration for others is a quality that earns you his sympathy, he would have greeted him as one who welcomes a king or a queen. However, his goal is not to gain sympathy but to grow income by any means to climb the social ladder, even if it means turning his back on ethics.

By highlighting the masters' behavior, Morrison points to the dangerousness of wealth, which opens the door to many temptations. as Weber notes, writing on asceticism and the spirit of capitalism: "Wealth as such is a great danger; its temptations never end, and its pursuit is not only senseless as compared with the dominating importance of the Kingdom of God, but it is morally suspect" (Weber: 156-157).

In D'Ortega's vocabulary and way of doing business, there is no place for ethics when judged by his attitude and way of life. He does not see it in his relationship with his slaves, and even less in the place he attributes to God in his heart. Because of his lack of morals and loyalty, his relations with other white businesspeople are complicated. He is

reputed to be someone who, for lack of values, refuses to pay his debts, as this passage indicates: “D’Ortega was notorious for unpaid debts and had to search far away outside Maryland for a broker since he had exhausted his friends and local lenders refused what they knew would be inevitable default” (*A Mercy*: 24).

D’Ortega thinks more of his advantages than his relationship with those around him, which he gradually loses in esteem. He is an overly pretentious businessman who concentrates on everything around himself and his family and does not hesitate to sin or withdraw to keep or accumulate capital. Unable to honor his commitment to Jacob, he recuses himself and decides to pay his debt by offering a person in the flesh. This new compromise degrades the nature of their relationship, which goes from bad to worse.

Jacob threatens to bring the dispute to the bar to secure his rights, “Then the law it is” (*Ibidem*). Finally, after a discussion, the two come to a happy resolution, and Florens is the scapegoat. Separated from her mother, who will no longer protect her, she is attacked in her dignity, honor, and integrity. Her separation from her mother is the most heinous act committed by Senhor D’Ortega. It shows a lack of respect and consideration, but above all, cruelty towards his subjects who support his economy and help raise his social rank.

Like Garner or Schoolteacher, Senhor D’Ortega becomes almost nonexistent without the presence of his slaves. It is difficult, if not almost impossible, for him to withstand the vagaries of life without the assistance of his subordinates. These ensure the culture of his plantation while allowing him to be up to date and discharge his debts as stipulated below: “Access to a fleet of free labor made D’Ortega’s leisurely life possible. Without a shipload of enslaved Angolans, he would not be merely in debt; he would be eating from his palm instead of porcelain and sleeping in the bush of Africa rather than a four-post bed” (*Ibidem*: 27-28).

Through D’Ortega, Morrison again shows the lack of ethics and the insignificance of the master who flutters without the presence of the slave. It seems to insinuate the dialectic of master and slave where Hegel denotes a notorious reversal of roles. The master becomes the slave of his slave and the slave the master of his master. It also demonstrates a particular paradox: whoever seemed to be in control (the master) is ultimately overpowered by what he wanted to control (the slave) and who runs the plantation.

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ultimately overpowered by what he wanted to control (the slave) and who runs the plantation.

D'Ortega's lack of ethics also manifests in his view of his slaves as cattle and contempt for any idea of gender among them. In other words, all the tasks generally assigned to men can also be performed by women. Morrison, through this attitude, indexes the system of slavery which, to better profit from slaves, objectifies and treats them all equally as soon as the work is imposed. According to Angela Davis,

The slave system defined Black people as chattel. Since women, no less than men, were seen as profitable labor-units, they might as well have been genderless as far as the slaveholders were concerned. In the words of one scholar, "the slave woman was first a full-time worker for her owner, and only incidentally a wife, mother and homemaker" (Davis, 1983: 5).

In *Beloved* and *A Mercy*, the lack of ethics means the deprivation of liberty of blacks by whites. This deprivation is supported by the American state, which seeks to enrich itself by legalizing slavery and the slave trade. In her novel *Home*, Morrison shows characters alienated because of the quest for profit. For example, soldiers engaged in the US military trade labor forces killed innocent people for pay. The search for money has made them ruthless people who spread fear and blood on the battlefields. If during slavery, the white masters flout ethics by preventing black people from being free, during the Korean War, US state-sponsored soldiers spread evil everywhere. They are all there not only to kill and secure their wages at the end of each month but also for America's best interests.

Conclusions: History, memory and human dignity

We can remember that Morrison's work constitutes a means of dialogue with the other. Although she defends loud and clear that she is not the same as her characters, she uses them to convey strong messages. They all have something to say to each other and the reader. We can also remember that writing is a formidable and potent weapon for Morrison because it allows the reader to put his/her finger where it hurts. In the American context, she allowed her to defend the most vulnerable layers, particularly blacks and women, by relying on readers' moral judgments. It should be noted that as a writer, she cannot say everything, although everything deserves to be said.

Implicitly, Morrison's text asks questions about human dignity, about what it is to be a man. For example, in describing slavery with all its horrors and humiliations towards blacks, the author of *Beloved* and *A Mercy* focuses more on human dignity than this system's economic issues.

What is it then to be worthy according to Morrison's text? To answer this question, one must carefully observe how Morrison demonstrates the importance of dignity in black people and men in general. To be worthy is above all to be free; it is to live without constraint and dependence. In dealing with human dignity in her work, Morrison transcends the issue of the African American community to concern himself with humanity in general. Through storytelling, she shows how the desire to regain one's dignity or honor originates from many temporary and spacious movements. In *Beloved*, this desire is at the root of the flight of the dehumanized slaves from Sweet Home.

In order to emphasize the importance of human dignity, Morrison creates a narrative where events are linked to each other, with the common denominator of restoring the moral integrity inherent in all humans. At Sweet Home, the slaves are poorly treated. Their escape created other events like the assassination of Sixo, which is a significant fact, as he fled to allow his wife, The-Thirty-Mile Woman, to give birth to a worthy child. She also dispersed the Sweet Home men while behind other assassinations like Sethe's of her daughter, Beloved.

It is clear then that Morrison's text is of particular interest to human dignity. Indeed, it is not only in *Beloved* where the characters move to live in dignity. Home, for example, shows a succession of movements that arise from the simple desire to live in dignity. For example, Frank's family shows an unprecedented desire to live in dignity by leaving Lenore's house where she was lodged to rent another house next door. The same desire to be worthy is at the root of Milkman leaving the family home or business to go elsewhere to earn a living without the support of his father. Here, Morrison describes an immature Milkman who will learn to live on his own to be successful by and for himself. For example, Milkman, who leaves the family business to find his way elsewhere, proves that a man is more attached to his dignity than material things.

In addition, the movement of blacks in *Paradise* is the fruit of their desire to live in dignity. Indeed, in creating the city of Ruby, the main objective was to form a community full of dignity and free from discrimination. However, in *Paradise*, as if to conform to the antiphrastic title of the work, which is not at all a paradise, Morrison is ironic. The people of Ruby find it challenging to live with their dignity because it feels like a jungle. The women of the convent are victims of the cruelest harassment.

Morrison's work deals extensively with the issue of women struggling to maintain or regain their lost dignity. Morrison asks that it be protected more by highlighting this social layer in a racist, segregationist, and sexist America. In most of her novels, the historical narrative revolves around the woman, who often plays the leading role. Alluding to his vulnerability, Morrison extends his thinking to cover all

humanity. It is no longer about the black woman but the woman, regardless of her racial, ethnic, or geographic situation. It must then be understood that Morrison's work seeks to convey a political message based on the dignity of all men without distinction of race, ethnicity, religion, or nationality. Whatever our origins, we are all governed by the same human values that unite us despite our differences. Morrison implicitly shows, through universal values, that the question of difference is not essential. Even in violence, her text shows the need to preserve the dignity for a just and peaceful world. It is about creating the conditions of freedom and emancipation for everyone by relying on ethics because there can be no dignity without ethics.

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