



**HYBRID SUBJECTS IN MORRISONIAN UNIVERSE: THE
RECONSTRUCTION OF BLACK IDENTITY IN
TONI MORRISON'S A MERCY AND JAZZ**



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ABSTRACT

The concept of identity has been over the years influenced by several ideas and movements which have contributed in creating the perception people have on identity. According to Stuart Hall in Identiteetti, some of these movements include the “Reformation and Protestantism” where individual conscience was separated from the church institutions and placed under the direct gaze of God, and “Renaissance Humanism” which placed humans at the center of the universe (30-31). However, the main influences for the change were Charles Darwin’s biological classification of human beings (33-34) which is traceable in contemporary definitions of the term. Quoting Hall in Questions of Cultural Identity,

Lawrence Grossberg holds that identity “is a structured representation which only achieves its positive through the narrow eye of the negative. It has to go through the eye of the needle of the other before it can construct itself” (89). This argument indicates that identity construction is built on fundamental differences rather than on what the similarities between individuals are. It is within this framework that this paper sets out to investigate the construction of black identity in Toni Morrison’s A Mercy and Jazz. While using psychoanalysis as theoretical framework, the paper concludes that Morrisonian identity construction is communal and oppositional to the white community.

KEYWORDS

construction, identity, hybrid, black

RESEARCH PAPER

Introduction

The concept of identity has been over the years influenced by several ideas and movements which have contributed in creating the perception people have on identity. According to Stuart Hall in *Identiteetti*, some of these movements include the “Reformation and Protestantism” where individual conscience was separated from the church institutions and placed under the direct gaze of God, and “Renaissance Humanism” which placed humans at the centre of the universe (30-31). However, the main influences for the change were Charles Darwin’s biological classification of human beings (33-34) which is traceable in contemporary definitions of the term. Quoting Hall in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, Lawrence Grossberg holds that identity “is a structured representation which only achieves its positive through the narrow eye of the negative. It has to go through the eye of the needle of the other before it can construct itself” (89). This argument indicates that identity construction is built on fundamental differences rather than on what the similarities between individuals are. It is defined in relation with alterity. In other words, we construct our identity through what we are not. Elsewhere, Hall points out that identities are not dissimilar to language in the sense that we know what “day” means because it is not the same as “night”, and we know what “white” is because it is not “black”. We know who and what we are in relation to others (*Identiteetti*, 40-41). Identity is dynamic and responsive to hanging conditions. In *Identity and Anxiety* Stein et al. observe that it is bound to shift with changing technologies, cultures and political systems. It is a category of membership based on all sorts of typologies such as race, ethnicity, gender, class, caste, religion, culture, etc. It is therefore the way by which people define themselves and are defined by others on the above typologies. In *A Mercy and Jazz*, the black characters’ search for identity is an attempt to counter the depersonalization and dehumanization for which slavery is responsible.

However, the construction of black identity is an important theme in the works of contemporary black writers, especially those concerned with the history of slavery. To this effect, Morrison portrays black identity construction in a way that recalls the social forces that shape the life of black characters in the novel. Throughout her writing, Toni Morrison is not only concerned with the pitfalls of racial identity construction, but she as well seeks to show the prints of race in American literary history. As a black writer, as Valerie Smith remarks in *New Essays on Song of Solomon*, she “refuses to allow race to be relegated to the margins of literary discourse” (2). In her own essay “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature”, Morrison writes that:

For three hundred years black Americans insisted that ‘race’ was no usefully distinguishing factor in human relationships. During those same three centuries every academic discipline, including theology, history, and natural science, insisted ‘race’ was the determining factor in human development. When blacks discovered they had shaped or become a culturally formed race, and that it had specific and revered difference, suddenly they were told there is no such thing as ‘race’, biological or cultural, that matters and that genuinely intellectual exchange cannot accommodate it. (203)

In other words, Morrison explores the significance of the silence surrounding the topic of

racial identity in the construction of American literary history in “Unspeakable Things Unspoken”, and she questions the presupposition of whiteness that the American canon inscribes (Smith, 2-3). For her, the fact that certain critics continue to deny that black writers are excluded from American literary canon on the basis of race demonstrates that race remains an “unspeakable topic” in the culture of the United States (Smith, 3). As a Black Cultural Nationalist therefore, she tackles in her novels the issue of racial identity and explores the situation of black people in white America. She views her life and work as a struggle against the use of racial categories or any categories; as a means of keeping groups of people powerless and excluded. This aim is fulfilled in her novels under study especially in her depiction of the ways blacks construct their identity. In such portrayal, she preserves and perpetuates the cultural practices of African American communities.

Morrison’s construction of black identity in *A Mercy* and *Jazz* is multidimensional. She both explores the construction of self-identity and communal identity and shows the impact these constructions have on the black individual. She also depicts in her novels the significance of these identity constructions and their relationship to the white people.

In *Jazz* and *A Mercy*, Morrison explores what happens to black individuals when they lose ties with their black communities. Living in a rather alienated city, Violet and Joe Trace in *Jazz*; and Florens and Lina in *A Mercy* have to experience both the alienation of white society and loss of the past. In *Jazz*, Joe Trace recalls a scene of disharmony between blacks living in isolation. He says that:

When we moved from 140th Street to a bigger place on Lenox, it was the light-skinned renters who tried to keep us out. Me and Violet fought them, just like they was whites. We won. Bad times had hit then, and landlords white and black fought over colored people for the high rents that was okay by us because we got to live in five rooms... (127)

Non-communal life exposes blacks to the horrors of racism that is so rampant in the city. Joe Trace retraces how he once risked his life in a confrontation with white men who assaulted him. He further says: “Then long come a summer in 1917 and after those white men took that pipe from around my head, I was brand new for sure because they almost killed me. Along with many a more. One of those white men had a heart and kept the others from finishing me right there and then” (128).

The analysis of *Jazz* shows how a constant shift to the past when Violet and Joe Trace still live in the South emphasizes their alienation and fragmented sense of identity in the big city. Both characters are orphans, therefore, lack true self-identity and are in constant search for it. In addition, Joe’s surname, Trace, symbolizes his lack of ancestral identity. His migration to the city stresses his incompleteness and this is made appealing by constant flashbacks to his past, one of which he describes the origin of his name, Trace. He says: “the first day I got to school I had to have two names. I told the teacher Joseph Trace” (124), as he thinks he is the “trace” that his parents disappeared. He further explains that: “the way I heard it I understood her to mean the ‘trace’ they disappeared without was me” (124). According to Vaiva Bernatonyte Azukiene in “Traumatic Experience in Toni Morrison novels *A Mercy* and *Jazz*, the recurrent images of traces and tracks when searching for his mother (“He...had seen traces of her in those woods: ruined honeycombs, the bits and leavings of stolen victuals..., those blue-black birds with the bolt of red on their wings” (176); “the light was so small he could barely see his legs. But he saw tracks enough to know she was there” (177)) emphasises Joe’s personal incompleteness and vital need

to find his mother to fill the incompleteness. His migration to the city also signals his quest for identity and somehow explains his attachment and love affair with the eighteen-year-old Dorcas whom he finally kills after his wife Violet discovers he cheats on her. He finally accomplishes his self-identity after he murders his lover and returns to his wife.

In *A Mercy*, Morrison places her characters in complicated situations to show what it means for a black person to be deprived of his/her black identity and live in present society, and how they manage or fail to develop their black identities. Either they assimilate with the mainstream society or take extreme means to regain their black self-consciousness. The problem of identity or rather lack of it is of double complexity to blacks. When they are deprived of their freedom, cultural heritage and community ties, it inevitably leads them to experience the condition of split identity. Black women especially, as the novel reveals, are forced to undergo and overcome a double process of defining their black feminine identity. First, they have to find their own roles in racist, sexist and stereotype based hostile society and, second, they have to accomplish their individual self-identity.

Appealing is the way Morrison portrays the struggle and desire of black women for reconstructing their identity in *A Mercy*. This reconstruction is rendered difficult not only by their status as slaves but also by their gender. As the narrator observes, after the death of Jacob, their overseer, their social situation becomes more complex: “None of them could inherit; none was attached to a church or recorded in its books. Female and illegal, they would be interlopers, squatters, if they stayed on after Mistress died, subject to purchase, hire, assault, abduction, exile” (58). All of these major characters are orphaned in one way or another and this together with their traumatic past enhances their quest for identity. For instance, Florens’s mother sent her into slavery; an act she believes will save her daughter from the ill treatment she endures under her overseer D’Ortega. Florens’s mother claims that her handling of Florens to Jacob “was not a miracle. Bestowed by God. It was a mercy. Offered by a human” (166). Lina lost her family members in a fire disaster that ravaged her village, and Sorrow was rescued on the shore by a sawyer after a shipwreck. Their various responses to their shared plight determine whether or not they are capable of re-creating a healthy sense of identity. Susana Vega-González in “Orphanhood in Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy*” suggests that the European alienation from the natural world further isolates Jacob and Rebekka, while Sorrow, through motherhood, and Lina, through her identification with nature, are able to overcome their orphaned status. It is Florens, however, who makes a spiritual journey to identity that is empowering and liberating. She embarks on a journey that takes her to meet the one she fell in love with, the blacksmith. The blacksmith is a free black man who is different from the indentured servants of Vaark’s farm. Like a healer, he cures Sorrow and Rebekka of small pox. But when Lina sends Florens in search of him to come to cure Rebekka of small pox, he the (blacksmith) reminds Florens that she is a slave and inferior. This take place in the following conversation:

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

No. You have become one.

How?

Your head is empty and your body is wild.

[...]

No. Wait. You put me in misery.

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

You shout the word—mind, mind, mind— over and over and then you laugh, saying as I

live and breathe, a slave by choice. (A Mercy 141)

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

In the meantime, reading the blacksmith as what Vega-González refers to as one of Morrison's "dual characters", Vega-González suggests that he functions as the Yoruba god Shango who guides Florens to a selfhood, which, as her name portends, blossoms with possibility.

Because she self-identifies with the natural world, not the social conventions of Early American society, she no longer experiences the fragmentary split that once characterised her life. Throughout her physical and emotional journey, she stands out as a strong, self-assured and independent young woman who defines herself as free, although she is enslaved, as she notes herself: "See? You are correct. A minha mae too. I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. No ruth, my love. None. Hear me? Slave. Free. I last" (189). As if to signify her new personhood, Florens who begins her story with "the hands of a slave and the feet of a Portuguese lady" (4) concludes her tale with the desire to assure her mother of having shaped her identity and having become stronger as she says: "I will keep one sadness. That all the time I cannot know what my mother is telling me. Nor can she know what I am wanting to tell her. Mae, you can have pleasure now because the soles of my feet are hard as cypress" (161). The image of the cypress is evocative. The cypress is a wood known for its strength and resistance. By drawing an analogy with the tree, Florens means that having gone through the trauma of her mother's abandonment and the disappointment in her love affair with the blacksmith, she now stands strong and has successfully constructed her self identity, her hybrid identity.

It is from this empowered, self-defined position that Florens addresses her story to the nameless blacksmith as she writes in "the talking room" (161). Although Florens's new hybrid self-identity signals a challenge to, if not a dismantling of, the architecture of race, she knows the ostensibly unlettered blacksmith will not read her tale. "You won't read my telling," Florens writes. "You read the world but not the letters of talk. You don't know how to. Maybe one day you will learn" (160).

Lina in *A Mercy* finds herself in a similar situation. She feels exposed after white men burn down her village. Her quest for a new identity begins soon after the fire disaster, when the Presbyterians rescued her and changed her name: "they named her Messalina, just in case, but shortened it to Lina to signal a sliver of hope" (47). But it seems she is not comfortable with this new identity conferred on her by the Presbyterians. She is forced to accept it for reasons of protection, as the narrator suggests: "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" (47). She accepts not without restriction the purification rites that the Christians impose on her. She takes them for granted and prepares her self for what will be her own quest for selfhood. In the Christian cleansing ritual:

She learned that bathing naked in the river was a sin; that plucking cherries from a tree burdened with them was theft; that to eat corn mush with one's fingers was perverse. That God hated idleness most of all, so staring off into space to weep for a mother or a playmate was to court damnation. Covering oneself in the skin of beasts offended God. (47-48)

Determined to strip Lina of her identity, the Presbyterians now resolve to destroy anything that Lina possesses and that connects her to her culture, to her past:

So they burned her deerskin dress and gave her a good duffel cloth one. They clipped the beads from her arms and scissored inches from her hair. Although they would not permit her to accompany them to either of the Sunday services they attended, she was included in the daily prayers before breakfast, midmorning and evening. (48)

Lina remains firm on her cultural identity despite the Christian determination. She tolerates her name, but rejects the erasure of her culture as the narrator explains that: "But none of the surrender, begging, imploring or praising on her knees took hold because, hard as she fought, the Messalina part erupted anyway and the Presbyterians abandoned her without so much as a murmur of fare well" (48). She knows she will soon need her cultural identity to construct her individual or self-identity. However, this identity construction takes shape after Lina is sold to Jacob by the Presbyterians. Having lost all her ties with her past, she finally asserts a hybrid identity as she illustrates it in her concoction of Rebecka's medicine. The narrator writes of Lina that: "Relying on memory and her resources, she cobbled together neglected rites, merged Europe medicine with native, scripture with lore, and recalled or invented the hidden meaning of things. Found, in other words, a way to be in the world" (48).

Sorrow's construction of identity is different from the three previous female characters in *A Mercy*. Having been washed away by the sea, her name suggests the circumstances of her rescue, "Sorrow". "You can call her anything you want" (120), says Jacob, "My wife calls her sorrow because she was abandoned. She is a bit mongrelized as you can see" (120). As a matter of fact, she has no identity and can only gain some sense of identity in two ways. First, by attaching himself to Twin whom the narrator describes as "her safety, her entertainment, her guide" (119). "With no one to talk to, she relied on Twin more and more" (123). And secondly by relating to her baby. Sorrow embraces an alternate, intensely maternal, model of self-identity at odds with patriarchal constructions. Sorrow sees in her daughter's eyes "the gray glisten of a winter sea while a ship sailed by-the-lee" (134). The young woman's declaration, "I am your mother" and "My name is Complete" (134) is an emancipating act of self-naming. It shows that she has finally constructed a personal identity. Tit also underscores the potentially healing, redemptive dimensions of maternity, and hence domestic space among a global community of outcasts.

Commenting on Morrison's characters' ability to construct their identity in relation to their locale, Leila Baradaran Jamili and Sara Faryam Rad explain in "Unhomeliness: Deconstructing Western Master Narratives in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*" that throughout Morrison's fictional works, it is evident that the inner life of her characters, is related to the world in which they live. As the narrator maintains: "[t]he place is a stew of mulattoes, creoles, zambos, mestizos, lobos, chinos, coyotes" (*A Mercy* 30). These groups of people are as Ashcroft et al. put it, the product of

“a mixed or miscegenated society and the culture it creates” (*Key Concepts in Post-colonial Studies*, 147). The social and cultural context in which the black female characters live is dominated by masculine power that deprived them of their true being and identity.

Morrison’s depiction of hybrid identity to indicate the existing condition of the alienated black slave is in the same line of interest for Homi Bhabha who is interested in identities that disrupt and destabilise the idea of a unified and homogenous identity in the West. In *Location of Culture*, he argues that the hybrids, the displaced, and the non-nationals must invent their own “history” (9), through art, especially literature, which “renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent “in-between” space that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present” (10). Bhabha highlights here the multicultural nature of individuals with hybrid identity. He explains that the hybrids and the displaced in general should indict ideologies based on racial purity, ethnic fixity and cultural essentialism. This indictment is indispensable and should underscore the participation of black people in the formation of modern history. In other words, the hybrids should bear as a duty to emphasize the heterogeneous and composite nature of western culture, past and present, through art in general.

J. Nyman finds that the negotiation of identity should also involve a redefinition of home (200). In *Reconstructing Hybridity: Post-colonial Studies in Transition*, he writes that Morrison’s character reconstructs a new identity from the memories of the past events. In this way Morrison, by her metonymic exploration of language, creates a postmodern form of identity that deconstructs the stability and invincibility of Western metaphysics which as D.E. McDowell puts it, has imposed the notion of “the unity of ego-centered individual self” on novel writing and literary criticism (“‘The Self and the Other’: Reading Toni Morrison’s *Sula* and the Black Female Text”, 55).

Conclusion

To summarize, when reviewing *Jazz* and *A Mercy*, one can notice that Morrison “shifts her narrative inquiry from the devastation of excessive forgetting at the end of *Jazz* and *A Mercy* to what Elizabeth Yukin describes in “Bastard Daughters and the Possession of History in *Corregidora* and *Paradise*” as “the destructiveness of excessive remembering” (239). Just as at the end of *A Mercy* Florens, Lina and Sorrow forget their trauma and end up constructing a hybrid identity for themselves, similarly at the end of *Jazz*, Joe Trace and Violet achieve self-identity after coming to terms with their past.

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