

Claiming Linguistic Agency Through Voice: Rereading Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*

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A Mercy, Toni Morrison's ninth novel, has been traditionally read as a neo-slave novel that retells the history of the Middle Passage and the formation of slavery in the "New World." Few research has paid attention to Morrison's depiction of the voice, particularly black female slave's voice and its significance to the navigation of agency for the first generation of African American women. This article examines Morrison's writing of the voice of the enslaved and try to unveil how the first generation of African American women, despite enslaved and deprived, struggle to claim agency through voice and therefore successfully transform from the voiceless to the voiced.

Keywords: Toni Morrison, *A Mercy*, voice, linguistic agency

Introduction

Morrison's ninth novel, *A Mercy*, is set in America during the 1670s to the 1690s and narrates the experiences of early American women, particularly those represented by the enslaved girl Florens, the indigenous servant Lina, the mulatto slave Sorrow, and the White Mistress Rebekka. While primarily depicting the women's experiences of uprootedness and sexual exploitation in the late 17th century North America, the novel also underscores the struggles of the first generation of American women to claim agency in sound and transform from the voiceless to vocal agents. In the diverse spectrum of sounds emitted by human body, "the voice"—emanating from the mouth, the tongue, and the vocal cords—stands as a paramount medium of human expression and communication. Scholars in voice studies emphasize that "voice" is first and foremost a fundamental language for human's access to the world. As Mladen Dolar (2006) noted, "We are social beings by the voice and through the voice" as "voice" not only "stands at the axis of our social bonds," but also determines "the very texture of the social, as well as the intimate kernel of subjectivity" (p. 14). In *A Mercy*, vocal sound matters serving as a central conduit for the enslaved, especially their experiences of the "New World."

"I Like Talk": Fascination With Human Voice

Born into slavery during the last decade of the 17th century, Florens is a slave girl who is severed from her mother at the age of eight and exchanged for debt by the white Master Jacob Vaark from a Spanish slaver trade. Despite being deprived of her native language, Florens demonstrates a profound fascination with the sound of human voice the moment she sets foot on Vaark's farm. She is particularly eager to listen to people's conversations, "I like talk. Lina talk, stone talk, even Sorrow talk" (Morrison, 2008, p. 6). She not only loves to hear people "talk," but also soon realizes that people in the farm "talk" in quite different manners, as she herself

confesses, “All of what I hear is different from what words mean to minha mae and me. Lina’s words say nothing I know. Nor Mistress’s” (p. 6). Despite her initial inability to decipher the message conveyed in the women’s talks, Florens avidly listens to their speeches and displays a formidable interest in learning to “talk.” Like other women on the farm, she possesses a unique gift for acquiring the new language and quickly adapts to “talk” like them, as depicted by her own statement, “slowly a little talk is in [her] mouth” (p. 6).

Florens’ deep fascination with human speech serves as a testament to her acute acoustic sensitivity towards the nuances of the human voice. This exceptional auditory acuity is firmly grounded in the African cultural tradition of relying heavily on sound, in particular the sound of speech. In African cultures, the sound of human speech is “frequently conceived of as a tangible entity which defines individual presence and allows human interaction” (Peek, 1981, p. 21). An individual’s speech is not merely an embodiment of “personal force” and “a primary means of self-identification,” but also a crucial marker to “identify cultural membership” (pp. 21-23). This profound significance of speech is deeply entrenched in the beliefs of people of African descent, and it is particularly evident in Florens’ avid interest in human talk and self-driven approach to learning the new language through attentive listening.

“Her Light, Singsong Voice Is Lovely to Hear”: Learning in Storytelling

Upon her arrival in a foreign land, Florens initially presents herself as a “a quiet, timid [individual] at the time of her own displacement” (p. 61). When she initially comes to Jacob’s farm, she does “not speak for weeks,” yet when she finally speaks, “her light, singsong voice is lovely to hear” (p. 61). Floren’s enchanting “singsong voice” is perceived as a soothing and trustworthy sound, effectively dispelling Mistress Rebekka’s hostility and distrust. Besides, it provokes an immediate maternal instinct within Lina, an indigenous slave servant who, having been deprived of her own home and family in her native land, soon forges a natural mother-daughter bond with Florens.

Being tenderly nurtured by Lina, Florens is fortunate to experience “memorable nights, lying together” with Lina and “listen[s] in rigid delight to Lina’s stories, stories of wicked men who chop[s] off the heads of devoted wives; of cardinals who carry the souls of good children to a place where time itself [i]s a baby” (Morrison, 2008, p. 61). Florens finds herself particularly captivated by “the stories of mothers fighting to save their children from wolves and natural disasters” (p. 61). Lina’s storytelling serves as a highly illuminating and therapeutic experience. Both women, sharing a mutual feeling of deprivation and displacement, find a profound consolation and develop a simultaneous sense of closeness through the act of storytelling. Through Lina, Morrison meticulously underscores the vital role of the griot—the storyteller—in ensuring the survival and prosperity of the young. For Florens, an orphan displaced onto unfamiliar shores, the imperative arises to find refuge, both physically and psychologically, within the maternal embrace. Lina, in addition to fulfilling the role of surrogate mother, concurrently assumes the mantle of the griot, transmitting vital knowledge pertaining to nature, the truth, and the philosophy of endurance.

Asserting Linguistic Agency in “Confessional Telling”

Deeply inspired by the power of storytelling, Florens eventually determines to embark on a journey to become a storyteller. At the final scene, Florens scrawls her story into the wood of one of the rooms in Vaark’s unoccupied “mighty” house (p. 37). She remarks, “There is no more room in this room. These words cover the floor. [...] These careful words, closed and wide open, will talk to themselves [...] Perhaps these words need the

air that is out in the world. Need to fly up then fall, fall like ash over acres of primrose of mallow” (pp. 160-161). This scene is widely regarded as a poignant illustration of Florens’ development and empowerment. Evelyne J. Schreiber (2014), for instance, interprets Florens’ act as “an effective self-therapy, a means of freeing herself from the traumatic past” (p. 170), whereas Annissa Wardi asserts it as an act of “claiming a place for herself (as a slave she has no place), in the master’s house, ‘the space of power’” (p. 35). Florens’ act of writing on the wall serves as an assertion of her individual empowerment, and crucially, it embodies a linguistic agency that she has hitherto not claimed as a slave girl.

Florens emphasizes, at the outset of the novel, that her act of inscribing words on the wall is first and foremost a “confession,” a telling of her own stories “in her mouth” (Morrison, 2008, p. 4), through which she recounts her experiences, her self-perception, and her place in the world. Her “confessional telling” is a verbalization of her lived experiences. The words she engraves on the floors and the walls are more audible than legible, for they not only “talk to themselves,” but also “need the air out in the world” (p. 161). Such sonic and fluid qualities of the words demonstrate that Florens’ “telling” turns the inscribed words into free-flowing sounds, thereby transforming Vaark’s house into a sonic realm where the dominance of standard English is called into question and given way to the sound of the words. This affirmation of the restorative and transformative power of the word is a clear sign of Florens’ transformation from a “quiet” slave girl to an agent who is capable to use her own voice to transmute her suffering into a verbal art.

Conclusion

An examination of Florens’ vocal sound reveals her remarkable transformation from a “tongueless” slave girl to a speaker endowed with a “singsong voice”, ultimately maturing into a “confessional” teller of her own stories. This transformation underscores the resilience and perseverance of the first generation of African American women, who, despite their enslavement and the denial of the maternal voice, are striving to reclaim and reestablish their maternal and personal voices. Contrary to the prevalent portrayal of African American women as silenced or the voiceless, as illuminated in the numerous grand narratives within African American literature, Morrison celebrates the acoustic agency and linguistic prowess of African American women, exemplified by Florens, who leverage their voices to create a distinctive and powerful form of black female verbal art.

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