

**“GIVING DOMINION OF YOURSELF TO ANOTHER”: SELF-ABANDONING WOMEN IN TONI MORRISON’S *A MERCY*, *SONG OF SOLOMON* AND *HOME***

**Alexandra-Lavinia ISTRATIE-MACAROV, PhD Candidate, “Ovidius” University of Constanța**

*Abstract: This article deals with enslavement and other forms of servitude and unpaid labor found in Toni Morrison’s novels *A Mercy*, *Song of Solomon* and *Home*, only to identify the mechanisms which underlie servitude and how servitude becomes self-elected. Our interpretation is that the cases of self-abandonment analyzed fall under a perceptual coping response based on the repression of the negative feelings which the characters would be faced with if they were to master their own fate. We also deal with the defense mechanisms which Morrison’s characters use in order to cope with the rejection from the society and which fall under two categories: a) exhibiting new behavior in order to obtain more positive feedback (the character copes behaviorally) and b) reinterpreting the feedback so that the difference from the comparator is acceptable (the character copes perceptually)(Burke and Stets 159).*

*Keywords: slavery, dominion, coping strategies, identity, power relations*

In an interview given to NPR.org in 2008, after the publication of her novel *A Mercy*, Toni Morrison declares that “[she] wanted to separate race from slavery. To see what it was like, what it might have been like to be a slave but without being raced. Because [she] couldn’t believe that that was the natural state of the people who were aborn and of the people who came here. That it had to be constructed, planted, institutionalized and legalized” (Toni Morrison discusses ‘A Mercy’). Morrison further admits that slavery has existed in many forms in many civilizations, but that this phenomenon was eventually coupled with racism. This is the reason why the author chose the end of the 1600s for her novel, when America was more ‘fluid’ and the whole dynamics of servitude in every form could be recorded. Thus, *A Mercy* does not concentrate on black servitude only, but of native, mongrel or white servitude as well. Furthermore, Morrison’s insight also lies on the effect of learned servitude to the extent it becomes a matter of choice.

The world Morrison depicts in *A Mercy* is very colorful and vivid, accommodating characters from different backgrounds and in different forms of enslavement of unpaid labor (Cobb Moore 4). For instance, Lina is a Native American, survivor of the ‘germ war’ inflicted by Europeans upon the natives, Sorrow is a ‘mongrel’, Florens is African American, while Willard and Scully are white and indentured. Furthermore, Morrison points out the fact that this world, which started as based on a relationship of subordination, in Laclau and Mouffe’s (153-6) terms, switched to a relationship of oppression, through the act of antagonizing with the leading group. Thus, oppression drew together all the oppressed in a “people’s war”:

Half a dozen years ago an army of blacks, natives, whites, mulattoes—freedmen, slaves and indentured—had waged war against local gentry led by members of that very class. When that “people’s war” lost its hopes to the hangman, the work it had done—which included the slaughter of opposing tribes and running the Carolinas off their land—spawned a thicket of new laws authorizing chaos in

defense of order. 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's maiming or death, they separated and protected all whites from all others forever. Any social ease between gentry and labourers, forged before and during Nathaniel Bacon's rebellion, crumbled beneath a hammer wielded in the interests of the gentry's profits. (*A Mercy* 10-11)

What is the most interesting about this 'people's war' is nevertheless the fact that it was led by members of the gentry, of the class that was less oppressed than oppressive. Therefore, Morrison's account actually indicates a relationship of domination, which is formed in the discourse of the members of the gentry who decided to lead the rebellion, regardless of their reasons for doing that. The relation of domination was subsequently enforced based on racial principles, by the right of any white to maim or kill any black for any reason.

But the relationship of domination best becomes visible in the narrative from Lina's and Willard's point of view, with reference to an apparent contradiction: a free black man getting paid for his services. First, the discourse from Lina's point of view shows a contradiction in education: a 'non-Europe' was forbidden to look a 'Europe' in the eye:

When Mistress returned, rubbing her hands on her apron, he removed his hat once more, then did something Lina had never seen an African do: he looked directly at Mistress, lowering his glance, for he was very tall, never blinking those eyes slanted and yellow as a ram's. It was not true, then, what she had heard; that for them only children and loved ones could be looked in the eye; for all others it was disrespect or a threat. In the town Lina had been taken to, after the conflagration had wiped away her village, that kind of boldness from any African was legitimate cause for a whip. An unfathomable puzzle. Europes could calmly cut mothers down, blast old men in the face with muskets louder than moose calls, but were enraged if a not-Europe looked a Europe in the eye. On the one hand they would torch your home; on the other they would feed, nurse and bless you. Best to judge them one at a time, proof being that one, at least, could become your friend [...] (*A Mercy* 45-6)

Lina's interpretation comes in support of Morrison's claim that slavery is something learned, taught, legitimized and enforced by society and not a natural state of being, regardless the uncountable societies having included slavery as part of their civilization. Further, Morrison tries to demonstrate that there is no real interdependence between slavery and race in the discourse from Willard's point of view:

[H]e was still rankled by the status of a free African versus himself, there was nothing he could do about it. No law existed to defend indentured labour against them. (*A Mercy* 151)

In Willard's interpretation, the blacksmith is a freer man than himself, through the mere fact that he has the right to choose his employer and the right to be paid for his work. Nevertheless, his jealousy is based on racist principles against the fact that a black man has a

higher status than the white man. Had a white man been paid by Vaark for his services, the mechanism of legitimation would not have been started. Thus, in the silent discourse of the blacksmith, which said ‘a man should be paid for his work’, the relation with the society, which Willard has, becomes one of domination.

Florens is the character who does not perceive at first the subtleties of people’s relations in terms of exercising power. Her education showed that all people have to work, but not the purpose of the work or in whose service the work has to be performed. Therefore, she lives in a relation of subordination. She does not antagonize with her masters and there is no powerful outside discourse to situate her in a relation of domination:

I don’t understand why they are sad. Everyone has to work. I ask are you leaving someone dear behind? All heads turn toward me and the wind dies. Daft, a man says. A woman across from me says, young. The man says, same. (*A Mercy* 40)

Another subjection enforced from the outside is that of women. In the society depicted by Morrison, a woman who did not belong to a man (father, brother, husband, owner or master) or to a community (for example a religious community), was an outlaw. Even a white woman was challenged outside the ‘protection’ of a man: “Rebekka’s prospects were servant, prostitute, wife, and although horrible stories were told about each of those careers, the last one seemed safest” (*A Mercy* 77-8). Rebekka, a mistress on Jacob’s estate, was nevertheless de-rooted by his death, subject to the mercy of the society. She and the women at the farm, the women on the boat to America and the women of the congregation, all had something in common: they were “[w]omen of and for men” (*A Mercy* 85).

After Jacob died and her health was restored, Rebekka turned to the congregation as an anchor, as something to belong to. She chose subjection. She chose her mother’s bitterness and religious sternness she had run from her whole life. Rebekka chose to suppress her perception about the neighboring religious community so that she could live on, without being isolated from society. Rebekka is like the widow Ealing, in a way, subjected to the mercy and decisions of society, which we interpret as similar to the “mute, unprotesting surrender” in a horse’s eyes that bothered Jacob so much in his trip to Jublio (*A Mercy* 28). Nevertheless, Rebekka has always had an inclination not to make a decisive break from the religious community and dreaded the day she would lose Jacob: “[t]ales of his journeys excited her, but also intensified her view of a disorderly, threatening world out there, protection from which he alone could provide” (*A Mercy* 88).

An analysis of the coping responses of different women in the novel is made from Rebekka’s point of view. She somehow manages to find the strength beyond the disease that struck her and analyze her options to come out of her ‘illegal’ status as a widow belonging to no one:

What excited and challenged her shipmates horrified the church women and each set believed the other deeply, dangerously flawed. Although they had nothing in common with the views of each other, they had everything in common with one thing: the promise and threat of men. Here, they agreed, was where security and risk lay. And both had come to terms. [...] Without the status

or shoulder of a man, without the support of family or well-wishers, a widow was in practice illegal. (*A Mercy* 98)

Therefore, Rebekka contemplates the following options: withdrawal, which she could not do, becoming men's play, which she would not accept, fighting, which she had neither the strength nor the willingness to do, and obeying men (i.e. society), which she chose to do. Her coping is undertaken through a behavioral change, which is produced by a changed perception of herself. While, during Jacob's life, she chose to preserve her true self by ignoring outside inputs regarding her position, behavior and status in society, after Jacob died, Rebekka had to conform, in order to survive. She is displaced and she redirects her negative feelings at the people who depend on her, as a coping mechanism. According to Geneva Cobb Moore, Rebekka falsely turns to God, putting on a show of piety and becoming a 'Death Mother'. She takes up intolerance and hatred in the name of Christian faith and, like her mother, becomes "a disabling, pseudo power-figure [...] a facilitator of patriarchal law, of religious repression" (Cobb Moore 11).

According to Valerie Babb, the novel shows the evolution of theological ideology in English-controlled settlements, as "intolerant, however, forgetful of the past sufferings of its own practitioners" (Babb 157). Florens's journey to find the blacksmith brings forth characters that hint at the fate which women at the Vaark farm would get. Widow Ealing, for instance, accepts Florens in the house and feeds her. Nevertheless, she lashes her daughter's skin to demonstrate she is not a demon, having been accused to this on the grounds of her amblyopia. According to Babb, the accusers wanted the women's land in the context in which such accusations were not uncommon against women with no male support (Babb 157). For the women on the farm, things are even more complicated. Belonging is not a matter of choice:

Herself, Sorrow, a newborn and maybe Florens—three unmastered women and an infant out here, alone, belonging to no one, became wild game for anyone. 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. (*A Mercy* 58)

Without a master, the women had no status in the world. They could only become commodities, exchanged goods, in the hands of whoever got to them first (Babb 156). The self-sufficiency that the Varrks had built and the kind servitude expected from the servants was finally to the women's disadvantage when the link holding in place their micro-universe broke. What Jacob held for righteousness, living outside the cruel, unjust rules of the society, Lina interpreted as pride, which would bring nothing good.

The three servant women also undergo changes in perception and / or in behavior. Lina is seen as a steady, balanced woman who had already found and reinvented herself. Her change is behavioral, no changes being brought to her perceptions or to her identity standard. Lina chooses to continue being loyal to the people she loves, namely Rebekka and Florens. Her behavior is nevertheless altered in that she is quieter and she reduces or eliminates her

‘heathen’ practices such as bathing naked in the river or sleeping in a hammock, either by choice or as a result of Rebekka’s directions.

Sorrow finds her strength and her real self in the feelings and joy of maternal love, her baby giving her a sense of direction, of belonging. He has no need for her “identical self” (*A Mercy* 116), Twin, anymore. She renounces her double, which is also a coping strategy in her case, and she decides to be her own master for her and her daughter’s sake.

Nevertheless, the most poignant change belongs to Florens. She starts as an inexperienced child willing to please, accepting her subjection, her status as a slave. But unknowingly, instead of freeing her, her passion for the blacksmith continues to enslave her; she is, from Lina’s point of view, “crippled with worship of him” (*A Mercy* 63). In the depiction of Florens, Lina is the voice of reason. She tries to explain to Florens what her mother was not able to, that we are the result of the interaction with society, somehow hinting at the different status between a free black man and a slave woman.

Lina points. We never shape the world she says. The world shapes us. Sudden and silent the sparrows are gone. I am not understanding Lina. You are my shaper and my world as well. It is done. No need to choose. (*A Mercy* 71)

Florens does not understand Lina’s teachings, nor does she understand what freedom means, where the main difference between her and the blacksmith resides:

It is as though I am loose to do what I choose, the stag, the wall of flowers. I am a little scare of this looseness. Is that how free feels? I don’t like it. I don’t want to be free of you because I am live only with you. When I choose and say good morning, the stag bounds away. (*A Mercy* 70)

Florens is caught between contradictions. First, she is a slave but loving the blacksmith supposes her freedom. Second, she is afraid of freedom but still offers herself, despite her inability to own herself. These subtleties escape Florens, who is a slave, but loves as a free woman. But, as the blacksmith points out, her love is still a form of enslavement, be it chosen:

Because you are a slave. [...]  
 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.  
 I am adoring you.  
 And a slave to that too.  
 You alone own me.  
 Own yourself, woman, and leave us be. You could have killed this child.  
 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)

Florens misinterprets love as belonging to, or being owned by, someone. But she loses her innocence on her way to find the blacksmith, starting with the scrutiny of her naked body performed by the people in charge of identifying evil and ending with the rejection by her lover, who chose a foundling over her. The change that Florens undergoes in order for the self to survive is best depicted in the novel from Scully's point of view. Florens no longer wants to please, she is no longer defenseless but, most of all, she has altered her perception on the outside world. She is no longer willing to blame herself for the meanness of others. She allows her wild side to take over.

See? You are correct. A minha mãe 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. (*A Mercy* 161)

Another contradiction in Florens is the fact that the loss of innocence also means accepting her true self, maturing. Her acknowledgement of her status as a slave also means her freedom of thought. She finally comes to understand her mother's message: "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" (*A Mercy* 167), meaning that it is wrong to willingly relinquish your freedom in favor of another. Florens gives herself to the blacksmith, which eventually leads to her downfall. Yet she also has her passion, which helps her accomplish her mission and to transform Jacob's house in an unopened letter (Roynon 595). Tessa Roynon finds a second meaning for the idea of giving dominion of oneself to another – the surrender of the self into temptation, which is described by Florens in the second page of the novel as "nothing is more temptation" (*A Mercy* 2), rather than her surrender to love the blacksmith (Roynon 596).

According to Roynon, the concept of 'dominion' in American culture has several applications. From the historical point of view, after the Restoration of King Charles II in 1660, Virginia came to be known as "the Old Dominion" and in 1686 the colonies of New England were organized by James II into a single "Dominion" (Roynon 595). In Roynon's view, to "wrest dominion" may refer to religious and moral power struggles (as opposed to slavery, any form of unpaid labor, forced sexual intercourse or any type of imposition upon someone), as well as cultural and linguistic oppression of the non-white population.

Not once have we encountered female characters whose world was centered on a man – Hagar, Ruth, Rebekka, Ycidra are just some of the examples –, and whose world got completely decentralized when the organizing force disappeared. Morrison stresses the depersonalization of women and their society-induced dependence on men. In *Song of Solomon*, Ruth and her two daughters, Magdalene, called Lena, and First Corinthians, organize their entire day and their entire life expecting the violence and 'excitement' produced by their father. The narrator ironically presents the situation in the Dead household:

The way he mangled their grace, wit, and self-esteem was the single excitement of their days. Without the tension and drama he ignited, they might not have known what to do with themselves. In his absence his daughters bent their necks over blood-red squares of velvet and waited eagerly for any hint of him, and his

wife, Ruth, began her days stunned into stillness by her husband's contempt and ended them wholly animated by it. (*Song of Solomon* 11)

Here, we have a play of power relations, his control being based on his demeaning them and their self-esteem. But this exercised control only has one result: it suspends the female characters, it does not allow them to progress. At the same time, the two girls receive a very good education. Nevertheless, they are incapable of escaping their father's domination (Lee 66). This complex situation makes them unsuitable for marriage (no man wanted a wife with a better education than his). The two girls are often described as passive, effaced as their primary occupation was manufacturing velvet rose petals. This is a sign of submission and the smothering of all personal initiative. In a discussion with Milkman, Lena explains what her life is all about: keeping quiet, otherwise she would do something terrible:

I was the one who started making artificial roses. Not Mama. Not Corinthians. Me. I loved to do it. It kept me . quiet. That's why they make those people in the asylum weave baskets and make rag rugs. It keeps them quiet. If they didn't have the baskets they might find out what's really wrong and... do something. Something terrible. (*Song of Solomon* 181)

Lena compares her life to the life in an asylum. Her parents' caste prejudices are institutionalizing and displacing. Lena's way of coping is both behavioral and perceptual: she avoids behaving in a way which would cause a response from the people around her. By not engaging the others, she limits the perception on the lack of confirmation of her identity standard. At the same time, her evolution in society is blocked. Lena manages to keep quiet, until she secures a voice against Milkman, who had told Macon about Corinthians' love affair. Lena denounces patriarchal oppression, as it is only based on the grounds that Macon and Milkman are men and whenever they do not have a say in the lives of the women around them they unrightfully feel the need to step in and take control. She finally decides not to make roses anymore (i.e. not to keep quiet anymore) and thus to face and resist patriarchy (Qin 101).

First Corinthians also manages to escape this psychological trap. She takes a job as a housekeeper, a job considered a lot below her worth, and engages in a relationship with a man below her social status. Although she has been as separated from the outside world as Lena, Corinthians manages to escape thrice: first by going to college, second by taking a job as a maid and third by accepting Porter as her lover. Corinthians' fight is between continuing her unfulfilling life and challenging her family and especially her father by mingling with people below her status. In her relationship with Porter, Corinthians first feels shame but when she manages to come to terms with her act, she eventually feels empowered; she feels she is a woman (Lee 68). At forty-four, she manages to escape the velvet roses that only represent death to her: "First the death of the man in the blue wings. Now her own." (*Song of Solomon* 169) Corinthians gives up vanity and preconceived ideas and makes a decision for herself, which actually confirms her superiority and enhances her self-esteem (Pocock 292). Before giving herself to Porter, her identity was fragmented: on the one hand she was too good, on the other hand she had no say in the development of her life and she felt inferior and

controlled by caste principles (Qin 99). Breaking those principles let her identity become unitary, thus confirming her worth: “In place of vanity she now felt a self-esteem that was quite new.” (*Song of Solomon* 171)

According to Soophia Ahmad, Ruth Foster Dead is a very passive figure who does not even try to justify her existence and who does not allow herself to evolve (Ahmad 60). She internalizes patriarchy and gives in to being controlled first by her father and then by her husband and she has only one apparent act of assertiveness in compelling Macon to participate with a substantial sum of money in Hagar’s funeral (Ahmad 61). We disagree with this statement and in Chapter 3 we attempt to prove that Ruth is actually engaged in a power struggle with Macon, manipulating him and Milkman. This is her way of resisting patriarchal authority.

On the other side of the Dead family, there are the misfits Pilate, Reba and Hagar. While Pilate is able to resist cultural inculcations about the woman’s role, behavior and image, this resistance is diminished in her daughter and almost absent in Hagar. Although unattached to a certain man, Reba lets herself be exploited by several lovers and does not show any sign of personal development, looking “as though her simplicity might also be vacuousness” (*Song of Solomon* 46). She is the result of the values promoted by the white patriarchal society, which she learns from the picture shows. Reba’s ignorance and easy-going behavior nevertheless allows her to survive, unlike Hagar. Hagar is the spoiled child who can get whatever she wants and whose mother and grandmother are willing to give her everything. It is through Guitar’s lenses that we perceive Hagar’s paradox: being used to getting everything, she cannot cope with the idea of somebody rejecting her.

The pride, the conceit of these doormat women amazed him. They were always women who had been spoiled children. Whose whims had been taken seriously by adults and who grew up to be the stingiest, greediest people on earth and out of their stinginess grew their stingy little love that ate everything in sight. They could not believe or accept the fact that they were unloved; they believed that the world itself was off balance when it appeared as though they were not loved. [...] And they loved their love so much they would kill anybody who got in its way. (*Song of Solomon* 253)

Hagar is used to have all her wishes made true by the ones around her. Therefore, loving Milkman, she expects him to love her back. And when this is not the case, she is apparently capable of going to extreme lengths to annul the negative emotions and the challenge to her self-esteem. She is what Guitar calls a ‘doormat’ woman, because she is capable of altering her entire self in order to be accepted. The problem is that “[t]otally taken over by her anaconda love, she had no self left, no fears, no wants, no intelligence that was her own” (*Song of Solomon* 216). Hagar is not even able to go through with her determination to kill Milkman because she has no principles, no identity standard to live by. She will become whatever he expected. She is a product of the consumerist society and views herself as an object of desire, not as a human being (Storhoff 291). Hagar inherits her great-grandmother’s weakness and she cannot live without a particular man (Wilentz 72-3).

In the novel *Home*, Ycidra Money is another self-abandoning woman but her reasons are quite different from Hagar’s. If Hagar gives herself up because she misinterprets love and



possession and because, having been spoiled by her mother and grandmother, thinks everything she desires is rightfully hers, Ycidra becomes men's prey because she thinks she finds in them the confirmation of her worth. The mere fact that someone is interested in her and whatever she can offer confirms her identity and supports her self-esteem.

Ycidra was brought up to believe she was not worth anything, that she was a "gutter child" (*Home* 45), for the mere fact that she had been given birth in a church basement (in her step grandmother's words in the street), like street people and prostitutes, and this is supposed to be reflective of her future life. Except her brother Frank, Ycidra had no one to confirm her worth. Not even her mother, who never disconfirmed Lenore's position. Her lack of self-esteem, her lack of life experience and a dire desire to get away from Lotus, where everything she ever did was questioned, made Ycidra marry the first man who was interested in her after her brother had gone away to war. Soon after she married Principal and moved to Atlanta, she was deserted by her husband, who took off in her grandmother's automobile. Although Ycidra does not seem very much affected by her loss, her self-esteem gets another blow with her abandonment: "Except those songs were about lost love. What she felt was bigger than that. She was broken. Not broken up but broken down, down into her separate parts." (*Home* 54)

Ycidra grew up totally dependent on her brother, who would always "protect her from a bad situation" (*Home* 45). But this lifelong dependence on her brother to make things right for her also disempowered her. Her expectations are to get something good from men, like her brother, since she never could secure for herself the approval of the women, like her grandmother. When left alone, Ycidra continued to seek the closeness of a man and this is one of the reasons why she allowed herself to be used by Principal and later by Dr. Beauregard Scott. In his protectiveness, her brother also failed to let her understand what dangers may exist in the world: "But he never warned her about rats." (*Home* 52)

Ycidra tries to get her worth confirmed, while running away from the place and the people who had made her life unbearable and who had imprisoned her and prevented her from developing. Ycidra's coping strategy is perceptual. She wants to perceive the surrounding world as beneficial to her in order to be able to go on and even evolve. Ycidra is suspended, she is unable to develop her subjectivity and Frank is aware of this:

Her eyes. Flat, waiting, always waiting. Not patient, not hopeless, but suspended. Cee. Ycidra. My sister. Now my only family. When you write this down, know this: she was a shadow for most of my life, a presence marking its own absence, or maybe mine. (*Home* 103)

Cee lacks an empowered subjectivity and is totally dependent on Frank, like a shadow. Her presence is described like an absence. But Frank also lacks the feeling of home in himself. He is himself, yet he is also absent, uninvolved, suspended, like Ycidra.

After retrieving Ycidra from Dr. Beau's house, he brought her to Miss Ethel's to help her body recover. In fact, Ethel and the women of the community also helped her soul to heal: "Two months surrounded by country women who loved mean had changed her" (*Home* 121) Reconnecting to the ancient properties and the love, dedication and sternness of the women taking care of her change Ycidra, who is provoked to take the lead in her own life and escape

her suspended self. Cee is no longer branded and no longer internalizes the label of unworthiness cast upon her by Lenore, "she wanted to be the one who rescued her own self" (*Home* 129).

In this article we have analyzed a series of coping strategies that the characters employ in order to avoid the dissolution of the self. They step in when the characters' identities are disconfirmed by the outside world and the characters fail to negotiate a modification of the identity standard that would be confirmed. The analysis also concentrated on the play of power relations that led to the societal contexts in which the characters' lack of confirmation occurred and on the type of relations (subjection, oppression or domination) the characters are set in, showing that the stronger the relation, the stronger the effects of the lack of confirmation.

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