FLOWERING TO FULLNESS IN TONI MORRISON’S A MERCY

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Abstract
Acceptance is necessary when there is expectation. A person should accept all the struggles, hurdles and obstacles which are on the path to his success. Expectation sans the mindset of acceptance is self-destructive. A miracle may be on the way only through the pipeline of sufferings. Suffering is the price one pays for the blessings to unfold later. Problems are destined to bring blessings of happiness in their wake. Happiness and sorrows are the weight and counterweight to keep one’s life in balance. Clay is smashed and beaten to smithereens before being put to shape. Likewise flowers with beautiful colour and shape are housed in the cocoons of dark buds until their time to blossom. When the buds flower to their fullness their loveliness conceals their corrugated past. Sufferings do not destroy but decorate life. In Toni Morrison’s A Mercy, in the life of Minha mae, Florens, Jacob Vaark, Rebekka Vaark, Sorrow and Lina sorrows and sufferings are just milestones leading not to the blind alleys of despair. They are the landmarks of hope.

If you want to shrink something,
You must first allow it to expand.

If you want to get rid of something,
You must first allow it to flourish.

If you want to take something,
You must first allow it to be given.

This is called the subtle perception
Of the way things are. (Ching n.pag.)

As stated in the epigraph everything might seem to be conspiring against and running counter to one’s hope. Hurdles are but the stepping stones to success. Some tolerate sufferings and accept them quietly; some with murmur; and some others find alternative safety-valves to overcome it. Physical and emotional scars goad the sufferers to seek surrogates. Virtually all the characters in A Mercy are forced to become exiles and orphans. Suffering enables them to bond together in a family tie whether they like it or not. United together by fate, they can find solace in each other’s company but are not satisfied with their position. It makes them behave in various different ways.

Being suppressed, these slaves, indentured servants and orphans are all on a quest for identity and voice. They are affected both physically and mentally but are not silent with tolerance. They seek deliverance through alternatives. Trauma without and within finds outlet through words, deeds, or writings. It is the “Freudian Slip, which Freud himself called the ‘parapraxis,’ whereby repressed material in the unconscious finds an outlet through such everyday phenomena as slips of the tongue, slips of the pen, or unintended actions.” (Barry 94)

In A Mercy the characters who undergo suffering and trials are shaped beautifully and flower to fullness. Minha mae, the mother of Florens has undergone innumerable tortures in the hands of her cruel master, Mr.Ortega. It forces her to keep her daughter in a safe place and so she gives Florens to Jacob Vaark. Even though it seems to be an act of unkindness, beneath its bottom lies the kindness of the hapless mother. Minha mae can be compared with the mother in Morrison’s
Beloved who kills her daughter to protect her from cruel hands.

Interestingly, one notes that the meaning of Florens is “blossoming” or “flourishing”. Accordingly, she attains fullness by flowering to her best. She consoles herself after her forced departure from her mother by befriending Lina. It helps her learn many unknown things, especially about the world. Slowly Florens’ affection towards Lina matures into love towards the Blacksmith. Blacksmith being a free man inspires her to come out of the shackles of the ‘slavery’. Blacksmith tells Florens, that she herself is responsible for her slavery:

Because you are a slave. …
Sir makes me that.
I don’t mean him.
Then who?
You.
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. (139)

Florens can get her identity as a slave which is expressed through the letter written by Rebekka Vaark. When it is taken away from her, Florens is left in a vacuum. But she is able to gain courage through Blacksmith:

“Inside I am shrinking…. I am not the same. I am losing something with every step I take. I can feel the drain. Something precious is leaving me. I am a thing apart. With the letter I belong and am lawful. Without it I am a weak calf abandon by the herd, a turtle without shell, a minion with no telltale signs but a darkness I am born with, outside yes, but inside as well and the inside dark is small, feathered and toothy…. You have the outside dark as well. And when I see you and fall into you I know I am alive. Sudden it is not like before when I am always in fright. I am not afraid of anything now. The sun’s going leaves darkness behind and the dark is me. Is we. Is my home. (113)

Here, the last few lines unfold the transformation of Florens. In fact, Florens, who is afraid in an alien place is braced up to face anything. She claims her identity as an African-American by mentioning her ‘dark’ colour. The word ‘home’ represents their homeland ‘Africa’. Thus the knowledge about her heritage brings changes in her life.

Both Minha mae and Blacksmith call Florens ‘wilderness’ which is accepted by Florens. And so she proclaims her transformation as well as emancipation. To her great dismay she finds both missing to hear what for her is a happy news. The fullness attained by Florens is visible through her soles which are hard as ‘cypress.’

Jacob Vaark is akin to Jacob in the Holy Bible because both of them receive land from their uncles which enables them to become rich and gives them identity in the society. Both Jacob and Jacob Vaark are raised to high position in another land, after tolerating all the torment and trauma. Again, Jacob Vaark can be compared with
Moses in the Holy Bible. Moses leads the Israelites to the land of Canaan, but he is unable to enter into that ‘promised land.’ Here Jacob Vaark gives life to orphans and leads them but he is unable to live in ‘the newly built house,’ may be because of the two serpents made in the iron gate of the house, which stands for “ill omen.” Thus both Moses and Jacob Vaark struggle to reach the ‘promised land’ and ‘newly built house,’ but are unlucky to do so.

Jacob Vaark can be identified with one more biblical character named Job. As Job lost all his children, Jacob Vaark also lost all his children. Job is able to get his children back whereas Jacob Vaark is not. Instead he can get Florens who is the surrogate of Patrician his daughter. According to the proverb, “Experience is the best teacher” Jacob Vaark can feel the sufferings of waifs and whelps. Jacob Vaark has flowered to fullness of character by accepting and understanding the woes of his servants, slaves, and indentured servants. His suffering as an ‘orphan child’ himself makes him to help as a ‘master.’

Sorrow’s character also undergoes tremendous changes; she finds real meaning to her hitherto aimless and hopeless life. The word ‘Sorrow’ stands for agony, depression, distress, etc. Here the life of Sorrow is also full of bitterness. Sorrow overcomes all the obstacles and frees herself. Sorrow is totally different from that of other characters. Sorrow creates her own world with Twin, her original name which is unknown to others. She shares her notions and emotions with Twin unknown to the world around. Rarely does she communicate with others especially with male characters. Her words are few and far between and she always maintains distance from others. She is not even ready to say anything about her past life. These things keep her aloof from others.

This novel reminds the term ‘Gestalt.’ Gestalt is a psychology term which means “unified whole.” The word “Gestalt” is derived from the German word which means ‘form’ or ‘shape.’ Gestalt psychology is also called as “gestaltism.”

The gestalt effect is the form-generating capability of our senses, particularly with respect to the visual recognition of figures and whole forms instead of just a collection of simple lines and curves. …. Gestalt theory allows for the breakup of elements from the whole situation into what it really is. (Gestalt Psychology n.pag.)

Here Sorrow is shattered and broken by the repeated sufferings but at last formed as a whole she names herself as ‘Complete.’ She is able to attain her maturity only in the absence of Twin. It is only when she disconnects from Twin, she is able to connect herself with the real world, and to the needs of her child as every mother does.

Inorder to begin her new role with the new born child she changes her name as ‘Complete’ : “She had looked into her daughter’s eyes; saw in them the gray glisten of a winter sea while a ship sailed by-the-lee. “I am your mother,” she said. “My name is Complete.”” (132) Here she subtly hints that she had attained completeness by the birth of her child. Infact Sorrow gathers her courage only after giving birth to a child. May be only after that she comes to know about her own self and her responsibilities in the world. Sorrow is totally changed from her hapless state which is really amusing: “Sorrow’s change alone seemed to them an improvement;” (144) The change in the life of Sorrow is considered as her progress. And so her new name ‘Complete’ is apt to her.

In the case of Sorrow, changing of her names traces the metamorphosis of her ‘self’. She changes her secret name Twin to Sorrow and then from Sorrow to Complete. All the three names stand for the different phases of her life. Twin
means ‘dual’ which represents her dual existence in land and water and also an inward dual life. It creates chaos in her life and takes away peace from her. Sorrow means ‘melancholy’ which represents the sad miserable period in her life. Complete means ‘consummation’ and fullness which represents the full flowering of Sorrow.

Sorrow who is reserved by nature, is prompted by the legitimacy of her new status as a mother and speaks boldly with her mistress Rebekka: “At one point, Sorrow, prompted by the legitimacy of her new status as a mother, was bold enough to remark to her Mistress. “It was good that the blacksmith came to help when you were dying.” Mistress stared at her.” (131) This clearly marks her reaching the state of completeness in life.

Messalina, the native servant of Jacob Vaark is rescued from her village which is destroyed by measles. And she is taken from the Presbyterians to the house of Jacob Vaark. The name of Messalina is highly significant: “They named her Messalina, just in case, but shortened it to Lina to signal a sliver of hope.” (45) It is only Lina who has been brought deliberately to the house of Jacob Vaark. Lina and Rebekka become friends after some days. They both share everything and help each other. Like other characters Lina finds relief in spending time with nature. It is her harmony with nature which helps her to forget her sorrows. Lina shares everything with nature:

Lina gazed through the wavy pane of the tiny window where a flirtatious sun poured soft yellow light toward the foot of Mistress’ bed. Beyond on the far side of the trail stood a forest of beech. As was often the case, she spoke to them.

“You and I, this land is our home,” she whispered, “but unlike you I am exile here.” (57)

Lina overcomes her alienation by spending time with nature. Lina finds her deliverance with the alternative ‘slips of tongue.’

Lina’s walk through misery and sorrow has shaped her both inside and outside. She had been cut off from her kith and kin. She was able to sort out her past hoard only what she can dare to remember and such repeated exercise helped in her flowering and formation of character:

Solitude, regret and fury would have broken her had she not erased those six years preceding the death of the world. The company of other children, industrious mothers in beautiful jewelry, the majestic plan of life: when to vacate, to harvest, to burn, to hunt; ceremonies of death, birth and worship. She sorted and stored what she dared to recall and eliminated the rest, an activity which shaped her inside and out. (48)

Her maturity is marked by her power of discerning and filtering of thoughts.

In the case of Willard and Scully, they both want to escape from Jacob Vaark and fail to learn from their difficult situations. It has been rightly said by Winston Churchill, “The pessimist sees difficulty in every opportunity. The optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.” (Churchill n.pag.) Here Willard and Scully belong to the former type. They fail to turn their difficulties into opportunities. However, Willard and Scully prove to be very helpful to Sorrow. They act as ‘midwife’ during her delivery. In fact, Sorrow gives them the status of ‘Godfather’: “Having helped with her delivery, they assumed godfather status…” (144)

It has been very aptly stated by Anais Nin: “And the day came when the risk it took to remain tight in the bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.” (Nin n.pag.) As such, these characters have all undergone the misery of remaining in whatever state they are in, enduring every pain and finally flowering.
to fullness emitting fine fragrance and displaying varied hues of character. Life with all its trauma without and within has finally shaped them. Lina says to Florens: “We never shape the world she says. The world shapes us.” (69). Almost all the characters have gradually attained both physical and psychological maturity. Here flowering to fullness is the reward of trauma without and within. It is the presence of darkness, which enables one to recognize the worth of light. Infact, torments and tribulations are part and parcel of a successful life and every dark cloud has its own silver lining.

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