

## **The Role of Unconscious in Directing the Character's Behaviour; A Psychoanalytical Study of Toni Morrison's Novel, "A Mercy"**

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### **Abstract**

*This study examines Toni Morrison's A Mercy from a psychoanalytic perspective with significant reference to the role of the unconscious in directing the characters' behavior. Sigmund Freud's ideas and postulations have been adopted in this research paper. To Freud, human behavior is directed by factors that are usually unaware of the humans' unconsciousness. This idea explained later in this paper is significant in the sense that it reveals new hidden dimensions of human characters through Morrison's successful choice of a certain literary narrative technique. The psychoanalytic reading of Morrison's ideas and techniques helps readers to create new meanings and to provide new ideas in understanding African American fiction. Finally, this paper tries to prove that a stable character is a balanced character in which the social and psychological aspects are well-integrated.*

**Keywords:** *Unconsciousness, Psychoanalysis, Character's behavior, African American Fiction.*

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### **1. Introduction**

This study explores the unconscious dimension of the fictional characters of Toni Morrison's A Mercy. The general trait of the majority of her characters in the novel is their absurdity that makes them a threat to themselves and the people around them. This absurd behaviour is derived mainly from their fear of the unknown. All of them fear the future and do not show any faith in a better tomorrow. In most cases, these personal features are indicators of serious psychological conflicts in the characters' unconscious side. Thus, a psychoanalytical reading of A Mercy focuses on how the unconscious deeply shapes the character's actions and behaviors, taking into consideration the effect of the surrounding circumstances. The characters of A Mercy are mainly 'types' since they represent individuals or collectives in African-American society.

In this paper, the psychoanalytical approach, especially the ideas of Sigmund Freud are adopted in the analysis of A Mercy. For Freud, human behaviour is directed by factors that the individuals are not usually aware of which he calls "the unconscious". The study endeavors to show the significant role of the unconscious as well as the social, historical and cultural factors that shaped the characters of A Mercy.

### **2. Literary Background:**

This study aims to highlight the psychological effects of slavery and the quest for freedom in the light of Morrison's novel "A Mercy" as slavery and the quest for freedom have been the predominant themes in the history of African-American literature. During the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, which lasted for almost 400 years, thousands even millions of Africans were arrested and transported across the Atlantic to work in coffee, sugar, and cotton plantations in America. Many of them died in the process whereas others also died under the whips of slavery while working. Historically, the Blackman's horrible experience of slavery stands out as the worst level of human degradation.

J. Baldwin describes this idea by saying, "for the horrors of the American Negro's life, there has been almost no language". Thus, the recent African-American community came from different and various backgrounds, religions, and nationalities. Over the horrible years of slavery, black men tended to group and cluster together taking as their unifying force the horrible physical and psychological experience they all witnessed.

African-American novels are largely sociological. Many researchers have approached these novels from the angles of racism, patriarchy, sexism, discrimination and marginalization. However, the psychoanalytic assumption that is the fear of the unknown is the unconscious motivation that shaped and formed the behaviour of both the black and the white characters in *A Mercy*. Based on the psychoanalytic criticism, this paper explains how the different concepts and ideas of this field can be applied on Morrison's *A Mercy*. The characters of the novel are mainly representing themselves as well as the major psychological and social types they belong to. Thus, an evaluation of the socio-cultural behaviour of the characters of *A Mercy* based on their unconscious tendencies is provided in light of Freud's ideas. It is significant to remark that Morrison's *A Mercy* proves that there is a relation between psychology and literary creativity, especially in her portrayal of the major characters. Morrison is fully aware of the significant role of the unconscious in directing the behaviour of her characters. For example, the act of a *Minha Mãe*, Florens' mother, when she released her eight-year-old daughter Florens in order to pay her master's debt instead of herself or her little boy. Her unconscious motivation to do this is to protect her sense of woman dignity. Thus, she says: There was no protection and nothing in the catechism to tell them no. I tried to tell Reverend Father. ... To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal ... (pp. 162-163)

The psychoanalytic theory of Freud introduces the concept of "the return of the repressed", repression in the unconscious is responsible for directing the behaviour of the characters in Morrison's *A Mercy*. Morrison's protagonists-Rebekka, Sorrow, Lina, and Florens- tried hard to speak out their repressed feelings and thoughts. Rebekka does always give directions to herself while being at some solitary tasks. Sorrow is "thought to be daft because she talked out loud when alone but who didn't?" (p. 152). Also, Lina is keen on answering birds "as if they were asking her advice on how to fly" (p. 152). All of these acts reflect clear repressed conflicts in the unconscious side of the characters which is presented in their behaviour

Psychoanalytic literary criticism started with the study of the author's life in relation to his/her works in general and characters in particular; this is known as psychobiography. This way of analysis begins with studying the biographical information of the author from various sources using it to analyze his literary works. However, psychoanalytic literary criticism has turned its attention to character analysis rather than psychobiography. Many critics believe that the main character in a work of art is usually a reflection of the author's views and vision.

The individual characters in *A Mercy* have become the focus of analysis rather than the biography of the author. D. Westen summarizes the idea of psychoanalysis by saying that it reflects: the importance of conflicting mental processes; unconscious processes; the influence of the past on current functioning; the enduring effects of interpersonal patterns laid down in childhood; and the role of sexual and aggressive wishes in consciously and unconsciously influencing thought, feeling and behaviour is the degree to which it can be considered psychoanalytic. (p. 22)

Also, McCartney provides a comprehensive summary of the psychoanalytical approach; psychoanalysis aims to “understand individuals by uncovering desires hidden deep within the mind and revealing their connections with the conscious surface.” He also highlights the idea that “for the critic undertaking a psychoanalytic reading, three Freudian categories are essential: the unconscious; the sexual origin of human motivation in repressed infantile incestuous desires; and the symbolic manifestation of unconscious wishes in dreams, jokes, errors and significantly in literary works” (qtd. in Green 597).

In Morrison’s *A Mercy*, many motives and absurd actions of characters can be explained in the light of Freud’s idea of the unconscious. For example, Sorrow is known that she has always “talked out loud when alone” (p. 152). Similarly, Rebekka also gives directions to herself when she is alone. This idea applies also to Lina who answers to birds as if they were asking her advice on how to fly (p. 152). Florens, as well, is directed by the strange unconscious mixed feelings of her bitter childhood experience. All of these examples review the role of the unconscious in controlling the characters’ behaviour. Freud’s theory of the unconscious is still predominant nowadays in literary criticism.

Freud affirms that most of our behaviours are directed by the unconscious factors even though we are not aware of that. Moreover, he provided a classification of the mind into three main categories, namely theid, the ego, and the super-ego in an attempt to show how the individual personality develops and to try to diagnose the exact reasons of the mental illness. To Freud, the id refers to the basic instinct and urges which are completely unconscious. The id works to satisfy the biological needs such as thirst, hunger, and sex. The id targets joyful life and avoids painful things. The ego which is known as the self is totally different from the id since it is partly conscious and partly unconscious. The ego is governed by reality principles, in other words, the ego endeavors to satisfy the needs of the id in a real not in an imaginary way. The super-ego, on the other hand, is mainly controlled by the moral ideas learned from the family and the society. The super-ego is responsible for guilt and shame when one completely follows his id. The super-ego is also responsible for one’s feeling of pride when satisfying the different needs in a correct moral way. To Freud, a healthy character is the one balancing between the id and the super ego. (Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, 27)

### **3.1.Objectives of the Study**

The objectives of study were:

- a. To explore the novel based on its structural elements.
- b. To analyse the novel based on psychoanalytic approach.

### **3.2.Research Questions:**

Does the relationship of children with parents affects their lives, personalities and behaviour in adulthood?

What are the hidden component of human nature and how those hidden components work in one's unconscious?

### **3.3. Research Methodology**

The research used the descriptive qualitative method with the psychoanalysis approach by Sigmund Freud. The data were taken from the novel *A Mercy* by Tony Morrison. The research data were collected from the narrations and characterization of the main characters in the novel. The researcher used the library research method in collecting the various sources related to the main character and emotional management. The data were studied and analyzed to get understanding and connections with the research. In analyzing the data, the researcher used and applied the psychoanalysis approach and focused on the ego defense mechanism.

## **4. Theoretical Framework**

Psychoanalysis of literary criticism is developed from the psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud's theory. Some basic concepts of Freud's theory are about consciousness and unconsciousness which are considered as personality aspects about instincts and anxiety. Personality aspects are divided into id, ego, and superego.

The psychoanalytic theory of Freud introduces the concept of "the return of the repressed" to clarify the hidden component of the human nature and what he describes as the unconscious. These elements (desires, thoughts, and feelings) are believed to be hidden because they are not acceptable to the individual or to the society. Nevertheless, the individual behaviour of the person shows the conflict when what is repressed is replayed in the unconscious by the means of hallucinations, nightmares, flashbacks, and compulsions. Examples and signs of psychological repression are clear in all the characters of Morrison's *A Mercy*. All of them had a tragic past of painful slavery experience that is usually related to their own personal painful stories. So it would be logical to illustrate and prove how these repressed feelings, thoughts, and ideas reappear from the unconscious of the characters to affect and control their own behaviour. From this point onward, it identifies the unconscious motivation for the behaviour of these characters. (Freud, Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis, 43).

Since Freud's psychoanalytic theory aims at revealing the repressed feelings and thoughts, he suggests "talking-cure" as a way out for the tormented repressed unconscious. Freud thinks that the talking-cure process comprises collecting and revealing those painful memories in the presence of a selected listener. (Freud, *Studies on Hysteria*, vol. 2) In this way, talking-cure does not include any form of comments and analyses. From a narrative angle, the talking-cure refers to a narrative in which the victim recollects all the painful memories of the past in a way similar to a confession to a listener who pays a great attention to every single detail and most importantly who identifies with the same horrible memories in order to resolve the conflict. This technique of talking-cure is adopted by Morrison at the beginning of the story when Florens says:

Don't be afraid, My telling can't hurt you in spite of what I have done and I promise to lie quietly in the dark weeping perhaps or occasionally seeing the blood once more- but I will never again unfold my limbs to rise up and bare teeth. You can think what I tell you a confession, if you like, but one full of curiosities familiar only in dreams and during those moments when a dog's profile plays in the steam... (1).

Zeyneb (2014) assumes that literary texts endeavour to depict those desires, fears and wishes. Jacques Lacan called the unconscious “a reservoir of our experiences” that affect our lives indirectly. Moreover, Freud argues that the prime motif of human society is his unconscious energy which is formed of the suppressed wishes and desires i.e. The unconscious energy is re-transformed into positive energy which helps us to produce and create.

## 5. Analysis

To study these characters in detail, the analysis starts with Sorrow. As her name clearly indicates, Sorrow suffers from real painful unconscious repressed memories. Sorrow is the third slave next to Florens and Lina in Jacob’s farm, Morrison portrays her with “black teeth and a head of never groomed woolly hair, the colour of a setting sun” (120). Her repressed unconscious feelings start once her father’s ship was taken along with everything else. Sorrow was in deep sleep that moment because of the surgery on her neck and was left alone on the shore where the Sawyers saved her:

They had met beneath the surgeon’s hammock in the looted ship ... when the ship foundered, she did not know it, and if any unburdened hands and passengers escaped, she didn’t know that either. What she remembered was waking up after falling to the floor under the hammock all alone. Captain, her father, nowhere ... Sorrow had never lived on land ... Now the memories of the ship, the only home she knew, seemed as stolen as its cargo: bales of cloth... Even the trace of Captain (her father) was dim.... (p. 117)

It is clear that Sorrow didn’t know anything about herself or her family and she was named „Sorrow“ by Sawyer’s wife because “she was abandoned” (120). Morrison describes Sorrow as a girl “who kept wandering off, getting lost... a strange melancholy girl to whom her sons were paying their close attention” (p. 120).

Even other female characters such as Lina and Scully have noticed Sorrow’s strange behavior. Scully says “the look of her was daunting, complicated, and distant. The unblinking eyes, smoke grey, were not blank but waiting. It was that lying-in-wait look that troubled Lina. Everyone but himself thought she was daft because she talked out loud when alone...” (p. 151). To Lina, Sorrow is a miserable character with a tortured soul “In Sorrow’s presence eggs would not allow themselves to be beaten into foam, nor did butter lighten cake batter...” (p. 55). It becomes clear that Morrison portrays Sorrow as a girl with a tortured repressed unconscious or even with a conscious denial of her painful life where all her painful memories are buried in the unconscious to be forgotten. Sorrow fools herself as well as the others by thinking that these repressed memories have been deleted completely from her life. By pretending that she does no longer remember her past, Sorrow is actually repressing her feelings in a way that makes all her behavior a prey to these repressed memories “not then, not ever, had she spoke of how she got there or where she had been” (p. 49).

Unfortunately, Sorrow’s repressed memories find a way to her consciousness. This is embodied in Sorrow’s strange melancholy. Aggravating her tortured soul and painful memories, Sorrow has been raped many times by Sawyer’s boys. Like all of her past repressed painful memories that shifted to the unconscious, Sorrow cannot remember what really happened. Narrating these events to Twin, Morrison succeeds in showing how mindless Sorrow has become:

The housewife told her it was monthly blood;...

Twin and she talked about it, about whether it was the result of the goings that took place behind the stack of clapboard, both brothers attending instead of what the housewife said. Because the pain was outside between her legs, not inside where the housewife said was natural... (p. 120).

Sorrow does not even know her real age. When asked about her age, she answers "I believe I have eleven years now" (p. 120). However, the clearest sign of her tortured repressed unconsciousness that shows her psychological serious conflict between the id and the super-ego is Sorrow's invisible Twin. Freud describes such a case as "a split" character:

She did not mind when they called her Sorrow so long as Twin kept using her real name. Having two names was convenient since Twin couldn't be seen by anybody else. So if she were scrubbing clothes or herding geese and heard the name Captain used, she knew it was Twin. But if any voice called „Sorrow, “ she knew what to expect. Preferable, of course, was when Twin called from the mill door or whispered up close into her ear. Then she would quit any chore and follow her identical self. (p. 116)

The appearance of Sorrow's invisible Twin usually occurs when Sorrow loses all she has. Twin identifies with Sorrow's past, appreciates her effort and understands her fears. That made her the best companion ever that Sorrow can get one day. "Twin... was her safety, her entertainment, her guide" (p. 119). When filled up Sorrow's life, physically, emotionally, and spiritually, Twin was always there to back her up. In the previous quotations, Morrison clearly describes Sorrow's fragmented character. Sorrow's Twin is her inner self that can help her make sense of the surrounding events. Twin has undeniable role in building up Sorrow's self-confidence. This idea is clearly noticed at the birth of Sorrow's last baby. After experiencing the beautiful feeling of love, and unlike the previous babies who died at birth, Sorrow peacefully watches her baby with a rooted sense of motherhood. Thus, preoccupying her mind and heart on the baby, Twin signs out of Sorrow's life leaving Sorrow and her baby no longer "concentrating on the art of escape" (p. 121). Sorrow "knows what to name her baby. Knew also what to name herself" (p. 134), Sorrow began to organize and control her own life. She is no longer wandering aimlessly. Sorrow proudly and confidently says "I am your mother... my name is complete" (p. 134).

Another character introduced by Morrison is Lina. Lina is an example of Freud's idea of torn unconscious due to major painful events. Lina has witnessed the merciless brutal mass execution of innocent people in her village. These memories of death, shame, and devastation have haunted Lina and tortured her unconscious. Lina's way to relief her restless unconscious is to narrate her cultural and historical past. In the following quotation, Lina resorts to the same technique with Florens to relief out these haunting memories:

Suddenly a sheet of sparrows falls from the sky and Settle in the trees so many of the trees seem to sprout birds not leaves at all. 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 sharper and world as well. It is done. No need to choose. (p. 71)

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The brave step of narrating her painful experiences and memories turns Florens to work out her difficulties. Florens chooses the talking-cure technique to try to control her repressed unconscious in order to gain her self-respect. Her attentive listener is also her lover the unnamed Blacksmith. In *A Mercy*, Morrison uses narration as a way to free and to cure both Florens and her mother from their horrible past experiences.

In *A Mercy*, Morrison introduces the readers to what goes through the mind of sixteen-year-old Rebekka, a poor white woman born in London. Like an object, Rebekka was sold by her own parents to be married to the rich Jacob Vaark who has recently inherited a land in an American colony but in need of a wife. Since the very beginning of *A Mercy*, Morrison shocks her readers with a human experience that is devoid of any aspect of mercy. Believing that her parents do her good, young Rebekka, although being white, was sold and delivered for no reason other than being poor. Moreover, she is bought mercilessly to be a wife and to start a merciful family with a total stranger in a foreign land.

Rebecca's journey throughout the Atlantic is full of mixed feelings. Throughout a six-week journey, Rebekka was allowed to stay only in "a dark space below next to the animal stalls" (133). No matter what happens, Rebekka will never forget the painful memories of that journey, the darkness, crowded constricted prison-like space and the painful merciless memories of her journey to America. As a poor lower-class passenger, Rebekka was only allowed a few moments to leave her horrible place and spend a few moments on deck. Although Rebekka is not black and the journey is not meant to be a slave-trading one; yet Morrison shows a resemblance between poor white female immigrants and enslaved poor Africans. However; Rebekka is in a better condition than any African slave. At least she has the freedom to choose either to travel to America or even to run away and hide in London. Unlike enslaved Africans who are taken to face an unknown future, Rebekka at least knows the place she is going to. Her future is not that of a slave with no rights at all, but that of a slave mistress.

Throughout *A Mercy*, Rebecca's unconscious is loaded heavily with her memories of past painful experiences. She has experienced the feelings of being a slave. Her parents sold her to Jacob. This experience kept haunting her even after Jacob's death. Everybody noticed how Rebekka is close to Florens and the other slaves in the farm. This was the case until she succeeded in controlling her unconscious. She decided to act as a cruel mistress. This was indicated by offering Florens for sale. To Rebekka, the common memories with other slaves must be obliterated and any feeling based on these memories should stop immediately. She will no longer treat Florens as her daughter and thus she will never feel mercy for Florens anymore.

The common haunting unconscious factor among all of Morrison's female characters: Florens, Sorrow, Lina, and Rebekka, is their very poor parenting. All of these characters have witnessed painful memories and experienced bitter situations in which their parents failed them. Morrison's female characters have literally lost their parents either physically or psychologically. This has shocked these females and devastated their mental balance. Freud's idea is that some painful experiences to certain people are the main reason for unconscious conflicts that arise in their early childhood and go out through their adulthood. The absence of a healthy mother-child relationship has caused all of these characters psychological troubles. All of these females, regardless of their different racial, social, and cultural backgrounds, have sought comfort in other alternative relationships as a replacement for their parents. Unfortunately, all of these alternative relationships are lost that led to their psychological imbalance.

Freud highlights the idea that in the relation of the child to the different members of his/her family, a child can mature properly. To Freud, there are three essential stages for a child's psychosexual growth, namely the oral, anal, and phallic. At the oral stage, the child satisfies the need to be loved and stimulated. The child suffers from psychological instability and other conflicts when these needs are not satisfied at all or satisfied in a wrong way. If that happens, the child may either repress this need to haunt the unconscious forever or will seek an alternative that will lead to the same result as well. (Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, SE, 7)

Cleverly, Morrison adopts the stream-of-consciousness narrative technique, to give her readers a deep and honest insight into the unconscious of her female characters. Morrison uses the stream-of-consciousness narrative technique as an opportunity for any female character to speak out whatever crosses her mind. Thanks to the stream-of-consciousness narrative technique, the reader can understand how every character tries to control her unconscious, and also can judge every action in the light of the inner conflict from which they suffer. The stream-of-consciousness narrative technique helps also to enhance the psychological analysis of each character.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This paper has tried to analyze Morrison's *A Mercy* to show how repressed memories can come up from the unconscious to direct the behavior of the characters. The behavior of the female characters in the novel has been studied in accordance with the Freudian idea of the unconscious. Through this analysis, the paper finds out that the parental relationship with children deeply affects the characters' behavior in adulthood. This idea is not related to any social, racial, cultural, and sexual background. It is rather a general human experience than a specific experience related to a certain feature. *A Mercy* offers a number of female characters who have nothing in common from the outside whereas they share everything in common from the inside. Every female character is double-victimized. These

females have been victimized by their families as well as the surrounding society. This makes these characters the perfect choice for applying Freud's theory of the unconscious.

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