



UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DA PARAÍBA  
CENTRO DE CIÊNCIAS HUMANAS, LETRAS E ARTES  
COORDENAÇÃO DOS CURSOS DE GRADUAÇÃO PRESENCIAIS DE  
LICENCIATURA EM LETRAS  
LICENCIATURA EM LÍNGUA INGLESA

LAURA GABRIELLY DOS SANTOS BENTO

“HEAR A TUA MÃE”: BLACK WOMANHOOD, ENSLAVEMENT AND NEO-SLAVE  
NARRATIVES IN *A MERCY* BY TONI MORRISON

JOÃO PESSOA -PB  
2023

LAURA GABRIELLY DOS SANTOS BENTO

“HEAR A TUA MÃE”: BLACK WOMANHOOD, ENSLAVEMENT AND NEO-SLAVE  
NARRATIVES IN *A MERCY* BY TONI MORRISON

Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso apresentado à  
Coordenação do Curso de Licenciatura em Letras,  
da Universidade Federal da Paraíba – UFPB,  
como requisito parcial para obtenção do título de  
Licenciatura em Letras - Inglês.

Orientadora: Prof<sup>ª</sup>. Dr<sup>ª</sup>. Danielle de Luna e Silva.

João Pessoa  
2023

## Ficha Catalográfica

### Catálogo na publicação Seção de Catalogação e Classificação

B478h Bento, Laura Gabrielly dos Santos.

"Hear a tua mãe" : black womanhood, enslavement and neo - slave narratives in a Mercy by Toni Morrison. / Laura Gabrielly dos Santos Bento. - João Pessoa, 2023.  
44 f.

Orientadora : Danielle de Luna e Silva  
Silva. TCC (Graduação) - Universidade Federal da Paraíba/Centro de Ciências Humanas, Letras e Artes, 2023.

1. Compaixão. 2. Narrativas neo-escravas.  
UFPB/CC Rememória. 4. Relacionamento mãe-filha. I. CDU  
HLA Silva, Danielle de Luna e Silva. II. Título. 82.09

*Yes, Mother. I can see you are flawed. You have not hidden it. That is your  
greatest gift to me.*  
(Alice Walker)

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deep appreciation and gratitude to the individuals who have supported and contributed to the completion of this research.

First and foremost, I extend my sincere thanks to my supervisor, Danielle de Luna e Silva, for her invaluable guidance, unwavering support, and mentorship throughout this graduation course, and this research process. Her expertise and insights have been instrumental in shaping my own understanding of literature.

I am also indebted to the members of my research committee, Renata Gonçalves and Liane Schneider, for their valuable feedback and constructive criticism, which significantly adds the quality of this study. I extend my heartfelt thanks to the Federal University of Paraíba for providing the necessary resources, access to the library, and research facilities that were indispensable for conducting this research. While studying on this campus, I developed skills to refine my understanding of the multiple social realities that exist, and I'll be forever grateful for that.

I am grateful to my family for their unwavering support, encouragement and beliefs that I would be able to achieve a graduation course at a Federal University, even though I had to face many hardships for being a student that comes from the public system education. They made it possible for me to archive this. This is not only a result of an effort of mine, but also the struggles we all faced through as a family. Thanks, Sebastião Gabriel dos Santos, for being my sponsor in this journey, and our living guiding ancestor. Thank you, Lucia Paula dos Santos for bringing me to this world to achieve my dreams and transform small aspects of reality around me, you are my greatest inspiration, *mainha*. Thank you, Maria Lucia Souza dos Santos for all your prayers, comfort, and words of wisdom shed into my heart. Thank you, Lucineia Patricia dos Santos for being my first educator, my first inspiration for the love for the educational field, and for being my *titia* that taught me how to read, my greatest passion. Special thanks to my sisters, Maria Clara Santos Brito and Vitoria Farias de Oliveira Brito for the love, and support, this is for you two to understand that we can grow to the size of our dreams. Also, I would like to thank my stepfather, Hugo de Oliveira Brito, for understanding the ups and downs of this academic journey.

Last but not least, I want to thank my chosen family of friends. Ruth Simplicio do Nascimento and Rennan Cabral Paulino I thank you for all of our learnings, research and studies together, you've been the greatest collaborator one could possibly esteem, without you this research wouldn't be complete. Thank you Wesley da Silva, Isabelle Maria da Fontes Silva Patriota, and Thaislane Ferreira Balbino for believing in my potential to expand my horizons. I also am deeply grateful to the friend that started this graduation journey with me, Silvia Rejane da Silva, who provided emotional support and a sense of camaraderie since the very beginning of these years of graduation course. Thank you for showing me that even as individuals, we thrive within communities, where we nurture one another with love, understanding, acceptance and shared commitment to self-improvement.

This research would not have been possible without the collective contributions of these individuals and institutions. Nevertheless, I acknowledge that any errors or oversights are entirely my own responsibility.

## RESUMO

Esta pesquisa, originalmente iniciada no âmbito do projeto "Vozes silenciadas: escravidão e literatura de autoria feminina no Brasil e nos Estados Unidos", aprofunda-se em uma análise da obra literária *Compaixão* (2008), da renomada autora afro-estadunidense Toni Morrison. O objetivo principal desta pesquisa é posicionar *Compaixão* como uma narrativa neo-escrava contemporânea, elucidando o retrato das mulheres negras durante o período da escravização americana presente na narrativa, tudo dentro do contexto desse gênero literário específico. Um ponto focal de nossa investigação está centrado nas rupturas multifacetadas dos relacionamentos entre mãe e filha, que surgem como consequência direta dos impactos duradouros da escravização na vida dessas mulheres negras. Para orientar nossos esforços analíticos, adotamos uma abordagem que dá grande ênfase à incorporação das perspectivas teóricas das mulheres negras. Para nos livrarmos das imagens limitadoras e controladoras tradicionalmente atribuídas às mulheres negras, é imperativo nos aproximarmos das experiências, vozes e perspectivas do próprio grupo que estamos investigando. Assim, nossa pesquisa se alinha com as vozes e as realidades vividas pelas mulheres negras, elevando suas narrativas como fontes integrais de percepção e também incorporando uma base teórica discutida por mulheres negras. Essa pesquisa tem o intuito de não apenas lançar luz sobre o retrato singular das mulheres negras nas narrativas neo-escravas, mas também serve para promover uma compreensão mais abrangente das dimensões multifacetadas de suas experiências, promovendo assim um cenário inclusivo e diversificado no discurso literário. Por meio desta pesquisa, revelamos as rupturas do relacionamento entre mãe e filha negras como resultado da escravidão. Apesar de seu profundo impacto na vida da personagem principal de *Compaixão*, essa adversidade não impediu que Florens desenvolvesse uma perspectiva única sobre a liberdade, servindo como uma alusão poderosa à narrativa mais ampla da compreensão de liberdade das mulheres negras, muitas vezes negligenciada.

**Palavras-chave:** *Compaixão*; narrativas neo-escravas; memória; relacionamento mãe-filha.

## ABSTRACT

This research, originally initiated within the framework of the project "Silenced voices: slavery and literature of female authorship in Brazil and the United States," delves into a comprehensive analysis of *A Mercy* (2008) by renowned African American author Toni Morrison. The primary aim of this research is to position *A Mercy* as a contemporary neo-slave narrative, elucidating the portrayal of black women during the period of American slavery present in the narrative, all within the nuanced context of this specific literary genre. A focal point of our investigation centers on the multifaceted ruptures within mother-daughter relationships, which emerge as a direct consequence of the enduring impacts of slavery on the lives of these women. To guide our analytical endeavors, we have adopted an approach that places great emphasis on incorporating the theoretical perspectives of black women. In order to extricate ourselves from the confining controlling images traditionally ascribed to black women, it is imperative to draw closer to the experiences, voices, and perspectives of the very group we are investigating. Our research thus aligns itself with the voices and lived realities of black women, elevating their narratives as integral sources of insight, and also incorporating a theoretical background discussed by black women. This venture not only sheds light on the unique portrayal of black women within neo-slave narratives, but also serves to promote a more comprehensive understanding of the multilayered dimensions of their experiences, thereby fostering an inclusive and diversified landscape within the literary discourse. Through this research, we have unveiled the ruptures of black mother-daughter relationship as a result of slavery. Despite its profound impact on the main character's life in *A Mercy*, this adversity did not hinder Florens from developing a unique perspective on freedom, serving as a powerful allusion to the broader narrative of black women's often overlooked understanding of freedom.

**Keywords:** *A Mercy*; neo-slave narratives; rememory; mother-daughter relationship.



## **SUMMARY**

<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>1 NEO-SLAVE NARRATIVES: UNDERSTANDING THIS LITERARY GENRE</b>	<b>14</b>
1.1. <i>A MERCY</i> : CHARACTERISTICS OF NEO-SLAVE NARRATIVES GENRE IN THE NOVEL	19
<b>2 BLACK WOMEN AND THE ENSLAVEMENT PROCESS</b>	<b>28</b>
2.1. THE ROLE OF BLACK MOTHERHOOD IN THE SLAVERY CONTEXT: MOTHER AND DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIP IN <i>A MERCY</i>	35
<b>3 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS</b>	<b>41</b>
<b>REFERENCES</b>	<b>43</b>

## INTRODUCTION

To explore motherhood in contemporary dialogues is to seek for the awareness of intricate layers of human relationships, identity and the historical context in which we are shaped. Thereby, the main objective of this study is to understand the impacts of slavery on black mother-daughter relationships and its representation in neo-slave narratives. The urge to dialogue with such a relevant theme stems from the belief that to better contribute to a dialogue about motherhood in our society we must bring forth multiple voices to share different types of motherhood, especially the marginalized groups. By acknowledging the complexities of black mother-daughter relationships in the context of slavery, we offer a space of hearing and contributing to the ongoing discussions about race, gender and historical debts that continue to affect our contemporary society.

We elected *A Mercy* (2008) by Toni Morrison as our object of research, due to the take the author chose to display the hardships of slavery period of the seventeenth century in the skin of an enslaved black girl, Florens, and understand what her mother, whom is addressed in the narrative as “minha mãe” – Portuguese for ‘my mother’, was capable of doing to prevent her daughter from living the same traumas the mother herself had endured. To add to the already existent discussion around the categorization of *A Mercy* as a neo-slave narrative, and, to further implement in the discussion proposed by Namradja (2015) work, we propose to understand the impacts of slavery on black mother-daughter relationships presented in the novel. Our proposal is to listen to these historical fictions, and the tools black women created to express their multifaceted life experience to understand how they reverberate in today’s conversations about motherhood and societal change.

This research is a continuation of the research *corpus* of the Institutional Program of Scholarships in Scientific Research (PIBIC) at the *Universidade Federal da Paraíba* (UFPB) under the project “Silenced Voices: slavery and women writing in Brazil and the United States”. During this investigation, we initiated our research about black women’s experiences in the enslavement process discussed through the literary genre neo-slave narratives and its heritage in literature. As we delimited the focus of our research, we deemed it necessary that most of our epistemology should concentrate on black women researchers discussing the subjects proposed in the novels written by black women writers. We made this choice based on the fact that we need to distance ourselves from racist controlling imaginations, for that our studies are based on those to whom this history belongs.

These studies on analysis developed by black women academics on US black women writers' literary pieces show the tangible movement they have accomplished by creating a theoretical ground for their historical narratives. This is a way to go against perpetuated racism by white academia in the US context, that has it disguised as a ridiculed caricature of education based on the most vile dissemination of misinformation to alienate masses from black women's real experiences, according to hooks (1987). This way, neo-slave narrative comes as a tool for this retake of the narrative and retelling of history. To have a better comprehension of the neo-slave narratives we proposed in the first chapter an analysis of the genre upbringing, also presenting its characteristics, providing a section dedicated to analyze black women's experience within the genre. The chapters of this research provide the combination of the needed theory to understand the concepts approached here, and also the analysis of the novel.

When addressing enslavement according to Davis (1981) in most cases black women and men received the same mistreatment, but when it comes to addressing gender, black women faced punishments that fitted only their sex. In this research, we will delve into black women's experiences in the enslavement system. But one of the main themes we will approach is how neglected black women have been since the constitution of the United States of America, or better phrasing, how America was built on top of black women's bodies, in which no historic reparation would be enough to have some equity after this debt. Thus, much of the experiences black women endured in the enslavement process, which will be further discussed in chapter two, oblige an understanding that it has enduring effects in today's relationships they develop.

Morrison points out that in the slave narrative, there was a reshaping of the slaves' own experiences coming from their own voices – in attempts to make their stories more “palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it, they were in silent about many things and ‘forgot’ many other things” (MORRISON, 1995, p. 91). For that, there was a crescent urge for a genre that embraced the aspects that slave narratives did not.

Neo-Slave Narrative is a genre committed to the ancestor story of black US slave history, but approaching aspects that are more connected to close heritage, *A Mercy* presents itself as a narrative that explores black women's experience in slavery unveiling the implications of the tortures they've been through and its' effects on the characters development in the next generation. Our methodology consists in the reading of the novel

supported by a theoretical background that reiterates the reimagining of the individuality of a black person, supported by authors such as Hill Collins (2000), Spillers (1987), Otten (2014) and Morrison (1995).

Additionally, studying neo-slave narratives under this scope of research allows us to understand that most of the white contemporary behavior toward black women is deeply rooted in slavery, as much as the controlling images imposed towards them such as ‘mammies’, ‘mules of the world’ that will be furtherly approached. This way, to understand their own identity, it is important that black women have access to knowledge about enslaved history from the perspective of the oppressed side of history, specifically black women, so they can come up with their own sense of identity and freedom.

The theme that we focus on within this narrative surrounds the separation of the black family, which is directly connected to the impacts slavery held on the lives of black women. How can this loss of contact with family members be impactful in the lives of the characters? For that, *A Mercy* explores in a delicate way these impacts throughout the novel, and also explores in a very interesting approach in the last chapter a few aspects of the Middle Passage, invoking questionings surrounding this theme as proposed by neo-slave narratives. Additionally, Morrison leaves her own contribution to the genre and its approach on black enslaved women’s understanding of the self: the ruptured mother-daughter relationship and its effects on the sense of identity and what is the possible outcomes in today’s capitalist society of the United States of America.

*A Mercy*, which connects directly to her most acclaimed work, *Beloved* (1987), as an insightful and frightening depiction of the capacity of mother love to generate paradoxically brutal acts of uncompromised compassion in a world warped and distorted by a slave culture. “They struggle to preserve the “tribe,” the family above all else, against the corrosive culture that dominates them” (OTTEN, 2013, p 84-85). This struggle in the face of external influences and pressures that threaten to erase their cultural and familial values constantly defiants the imposed order.

Writing books, poems, songs, and artwork about black history—a subject that has historically been neglected by white historians—belongs to a movement that started decades earlier. Thereby, at the age of eighteen Toni Morrison “was the first member of her family to attend college” (Roynon, 2013, p. 4), and studied with veteran intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance at Howard University. Morrison soon became an academic, a teacher, a literary

critic, and a writer. As a result, Morrison's heritage, education and surroundings have a direct influence on what she writes, as much as her writing skills have left an impactful gesture to literature with books such as *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Beloved* (1987) and *A Mercy* (2008). "It would be difficult, and perhaps counterproductive, to discuss Toni Morrison's language and narrative technique without examining the social vision, reimagined relationships, and redirected gaze they are designed to support" (RYAN, 2007, p 151).

Morrison received a Nobel Prize in literature in 1993 especially because she writes with a clear purpose in mind, a way of telling that goes beyond social awareness contributing to African American literature in multiple ways. The author explores themes that much of our society repeatedly chooses to ignore:

Morrison's point is that the "real lives" remain "largely unimagined" and feed no input into the "official story," which "is already in gear to protect itself". In cognitive terms this means that in order to keep the schemata intact, the media limit themselves to active gestures of assimilation, of appropriating lived experience to the already given public representation, thereby avoiding accommodation, i.e., a readjustment (or adaptation) of the given schemata to reality – which is nothing less than a refusal of learning on their part. What stays intact therefore are the racist stereotypes and the given intractability of policing power: "It would take the whole department to effect such a conspiracy, wouldn't it?". This way difficult issues can be avoided and their complexity can be ignored". (LUDWIG, 2007, p 129)

Much of Morrison's literary works deal with the sentiment of love and how it occurs in relationships that suffer the intersectional consequences of slavery, hitherto "sometimes love is cruel and pernicious. It is the "tough love" of mother for child that finds most powerful expression in Morrison's work" (OTTEN, 2013, p 82). Such can be seen in *Beloved* as mentioned above, but also in *A Mercy*.

*A Mercy* is a novel set in the late 1600s, before the division of the states of colonial America, and before the conception of race was broadly diffused as a social status disclaimer. The novel revolves around the lives of various characters: Florens, a young black girl; Floren's mother, who only holds the narration in the final chapter; Jacob Vaark, a trader and farmer; Rebekka Vaark, Jacob's wife; Lina, a Native American older woman; and the other young black girl, Sorrow. Although we take these intertwined lives and the repercussions of slavery in the lives of each one of these characters, the main character Florens is set on her journey:

The compelling voice sets up a host of unanswered questions from the outset: who is speaking, and to whom, and what has he or she "done"? "One question is who is responsible? Another is can you read?" (AM 1); is this a book about moral agency, about literacy, and about their connectedness? Who or what is "a minha mãe"? In the second paragraph we learn that the speaker is a girl named Florens, that "a minha mãe" is her mother (the phrase means "my mother" in Portuguese), that in 1690

Florens is dispatched on a mission to find the person her narrative addresses, and that she sets off in her master's boots with a letter that she knows how to read, although she has not yet done so. (ROYNON, 2013, p 80)

The relevance of studying this novel lies in the historical and cultural significance that this novel holds for the colonial US and its lasting implications on modern US society. Through the narratives approach to language use, as "Florens's "telling" is a hybrid text [...] It testifies both to her oppression, and, through the fact that it is a written as well as a spoken account, to the literacy wherein lies the potential for her freedom" (ROYNON, 2013 p 81), proposing discussion on identity based on self definition. Her contribution to the literary field goes beyond her experimental narrative style that changes narrative voices and timelines as she uses memory and imagination as her main tools.

## 1 NEO-SLAVE NARRATIVES: UNDERSTANDING THIS LITERARY GENRE

In this chapter we delve into the exploration of the fundamental attributes of a neo-slave narrative, as well as the introduction of the concept of "rememory", but most importantly we propose to elucidate how Morrison's work can be situated within the reflection of such concepts.

The definition of the neo-slave narratives and the proper terminology to address this narrative genre has a broader discussion – neo-slave narratives proposed by Bell (1987) and Rushdy (1997), or contemporary slave narratives proposed by Keizer (2004). Influenced by Keizer (2004) on her research “Black Subjects: Identity Formation in the Contemporary Narrative of Slavery”, we take Rushdy’s (1997) nomenclature and discussions as forerunners in the defining the aspects of this literary genre which he describes as

modern or contemporary fictional works substantially concerned with depicting the experience or the effect of new world slavery [...] The neo slave narratives' major unifying feature is that they represent slavery as a historical phenomenon that has lasting cultural meaning and enduring social consequences. (RUSHDY, 1997. p 533)

The structure of neo-slave narratives involves dialogues with the after-effects of slavery, so it also brings out stories from a perspective of enslaved people with historical settings from the slavery period. Rushdy (1997) addresses that this genre reclaim the old slave culture, which highlights how it kept the enslaved collective consciousness alive and their minds free, even though their bodies were enslaved (RUSHDY, 1997). The author initiates a conversation that later would become a necessary step into acknowledging this literary genre about the period that ascended its four different subgenres. Each kind of representation of this literary genre can be distinguished, among other things, by the narrative style, and the direction of the story by how far the effects of slavery can go.

The first subgenre is represented by the historical novels written by African Americans about slavery, directed by the third-person narrator. The second can be found in contemporary novels where African American subject narrates modern social relations that are conditioned by times of enslavement in first person, third person or palimpsest narratives<sup>1</sup>, and “sometimes these novels are premised on a contemporary subject's dealing with the discovery of an ancestor's narrative” (RUSHDY, 1997, 535). The third kind can be found in novels that trace “a family line through the contours of a broadly defined African American experience,

---

<sup>1</sup> The definition according Anim-Addo and Lima (2018) states that palimpsest narratives address fiction in which a contemporary African American character is obliged to adopt a bi-temporal perspective, highlighting the enduring connection and ruptures from the period of slavery until the present.

representing slavery as one of the determinant experiences of that familial passage” (p. 535), named as "genealogical narratives" (RUSHDY, 1997). And finally, the fourth feature is represented by novels in which the writing loosely reimagines the original slave narrative, here the first-person narrator can display discontinuous voices, self-referential moments, and parodic metafictional gestures. *A Mercy* (2008) can be placed in the last feature, due to aspects that will be further discussed.

According to Morrison’s essay “The Site of Memory” (1995), the print origins of black American literature lie in slave narratives. Although these narratives were written based on self-recollections of former enslaved Americans, Morrison points out two main characteristics that later would be approached differently by neo-slave narratives. The first characteristic is when writers present their story as a historical life: “my singular special example, that is personal, but that also represents the race” (p. 85). The second characteristic appears as a persuasive text, directed to the reader “who is probably not black - that we are human beings worthy of God’s grace and the immediate abandonment of slavery” (p. 86). Both of these characteristics were not well received by the abolitionists because they portray a still subservient black body. Nevertheless, the popularity of slave narratives kept gaining force as it was mostly consumed by white readers, inciting the counter position of abolitionists, “Their works only gave fuel to the fires abolitionists were starting everywhere” (MORRISON, 1995, p. 87). Abolitionists understood that through those narratives white people still kept a controlling image of black people.

Thus, the urge for a genre that could display a range of matters discussed made present, According to Silva (2017), many factors contributed to the emergence of the literary genre neo-slave narrative, such as the political and racial discussions of the 1960s in the United States; the growing force of the Black Power movement; the consolidation of the New Left; a resetting of the historical studies on the enslavement process, which “refute the commonly disseminated images of a “benigne”, “amicable” system that benefit both slave masters and slaves” (SILVA, 2017, p 54 our translation).<sup>2</sup>

With the Civil Rights movement taking place in the 1960s, discussions regarding the aspects of representativeness of the unprivileged minorities became more frequent. These arguments clarified how these stereotypical and “dominant representation overlays a broader political aspect, once said representativeness has concrete repercussions on the way these

---

<sup>2</sup> Original text: “[...] passaram a refutar as imagens comumente divulgadas de um sistema “benigno”, “amistoso” e que beneficiava tanto senhores quanto escravizados.”



"minority groups" are treated by those who hold the power to legislate, to control and to punish" (SILVA, 2017, p 16-17, our translation).<sup>3</sup> Which sheds a light on the systemic inequality and injustice.

Being so, Silva concludes that these depictions hold the power to transform a heterogeneous group into a unitary and homogeneous group, which benefits the unequal distribution of power among social groups, reinforcing the position of those who are more favored. Additionally, SILVA (2017) quoting Shohat and Stam (1994) defends that there is no universal truth surrounding a specific group, but contingent truths that cannot be dissociated from representativeness and the relevance it holds. Therefore, the need to understand little-discussed aspects of black history contributed to the emergence of different kinds of artistic expressions. Thus, writing in a literary genre that could embrace a few information that were recollected from collective, or genealogical memory, and a retelling of these stories with a new perspective from the enslaved, to contrast the "amicable" controlling image used to describe the black enslaved.

Another question that is broadly discussed among researchers on neo-slave narratives refers to the first novel that disseminated this literary genre. Silva (2017) deliberates:

Even though the historical romance *Jubilee*, written by Margaret Walker and published in 1966, is generally distinguished as the precursor of the genre, Valerie Smith (2007) points, as pioneer, the romance *Black Thunder*, written by Arna Bontemps and published in 1936. Almost four decades later, in 1974, the narrative *Roots*, by Alex Haley was published as a series on the Reader's Digest Magazine and adapted to television in 1977, reaching impressive audience ratings. (SILVA, 2017, p 52, our translation) <sup>4</sup>

Additionally, Beaulieu (1999) discussed a few other aspects of neo-slave narratives, emphasizing the importance of such a genre, due to its opportunities to dialogue with black ancestorship. According to the scholar, "The past, always a rich source of subject matter for black artists, has recently presented itself in a new way - as an urgent, enigmatic puzzle holding tantalizing clues to identify for a people to whom self-definition has become increasingly important" (BEAULIEU, 1999, p 136). As Beaulieu foments questions to base on the discussion, she sets the goal of her approach:

---

<sup>3</sup> Original text: "[...] as representações dominantes revestem-se de um caráter político mais amplo, uma vez que tais representações têm repercussões concretas na forma como os "grupos minoritários" são tratados por aqueles que detêm o poder de legislar, controlar e punir."

<sup>4</sup> Original text: "Apesar do romance histórico *Jubilee*, escrito por Margaret Walker e publicado em 1966, ser geralmente destacado como o precursor do gênero, Valerie Smith (2007) aponta, como pioneiro, o romance *Black Thunder*, escrito por Arna Bontemps e publicado em 1936. Quase quatro décadas depois, em 1974, a narrativa *Roots* (Raízes), de Alex Haley, foi lançada, de forma seriada, na revista Reader's Digest, e adaptada para a televisão em 1977, alcançando índices de audiência impressionantes."

What remains for me to speculate upon is, first, the impact of contemporary African American writers, especially black women writers, who are breaking the silence that has previously characterized black literature with regard to the subject of slavery and, second, of the neo-slave narrative itself. What contribution have we late-twentieth-century black women writers made to the overall literary achievement of black women writers? What place does the neo-slave narrative occupy in the oeuvre of twentieth-century American literature? and, how does the perspective of the mother change our overall understanding of slavery and its impact on contemporary African American society? (BEAULIEU, 1999, p. 137)

Evoquing Barbara Christian<sup>5</sup> to the arguments, Beaulieu quotes: "Afro-American women writers from the seventies and eighties made a commitment to an exploration of self, as central rather than marginal, is a tribute to the insights they have culled in a century or so of literary activity" (CHRISTIAN, 1980 apud BEAULIEU, 1999). This alludes to how black women's experiences have not been present in the literary discussions at that time. With said commitment taking place, Christian differentiates between literary pieces produced in the 1970s and 1980s. The 70's writer's first impetus was to challenge negative stereotypes of black women rather than to understand themselves (and their characters) as women. Although once observed the 80's African American women writers, Christian concludes that the themes proposed in the novels were connected to self-empowerment, but they also pointed out the black-perpetuated racism and sexism, addressing that the necessary change must begin within the community in which that reform would have a direct impact in black women's quality of life (CHRISTIAN, 1980).

Beaulieu conveys this statement by taking these categories and applying them to neo-slave narratives produced by women. The author points out novels – *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison and *Corregidora* by Gayl Jones – as illustrations of black women writers increasing concern with deliberating about self-love, survival and women's community, thus bringing forth the promise of both personal and political change using the genre neo-slave narratives as a tool to achieve their purpose. Beaulieu concludes that neo-slave narratives bring out the possibility of a connection with ancestral knowledge and history in a character discovering the past, and her own identity within a larger community, which portrays how she has finally empowered herself (BEAULIEU, 1999).

Even acknowledging the relevance of neo-slave narratives written by men, Beaulieu (1999) argues that the women's contribution to the genre is invaluable. By giving voices to stories once silenced, these writers contest history as much as beliefs and popular representations about black women, which contributes to their

---

<sup>5</sup> CHRISTIAN, Barbara. Black women Novelist: the development of a tradition, 1892-1976. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980.

empowerment inside and outside the literary text and context. (SILVA, 2017, p 52-53, our translation)<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, Namradja (2015) points out that contemporary authors of neo-slave narratives, mostly those written by women, address the notion of gender as an important role in the genre, once the transition of freedom was different for women than for men. In *A Mercy*, the character and narrator in the last chapter is *minha mãe*, Florens's birth mother. This character plays an important role in Florens's development, whose character also plays an important role in this research. Morrison's choice to not name *minha mãe* in her novel can be understood that this character has her own story compartmentalized, and her identity ripped from her as a result of the dehumanizing process slavery put her through. *Minha mãe* corroborates Namradja's statement when she addresses the feeling she had about being a woman, she goes on to say that "to be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below." (MORRISON, 2008, p 163).

Both Beaulieu and Namradja approach the difference in the writing development within the genre that black women have faced. Even though those researches took place decades apart, bringing forth contemporary observations, Namradja still corroborates with Beaulieu on how neo-slave narratives can take "liberties with the conventions of the original slave narratives, mixing different genres in one work of literature." And most importantly, how this newer shape of the genre "also provides new ways to help on a social level, thus enabling literature to do important 'cultural work'" (NAMRADJA, 2015, p. 18).

Neo-slave narratives come as a tool to redeem the wrongs towards black African American women's self-love, romance, sexuality, and representativeness, once "[...] the genre can provide readers with accounts of aspects of slavery" (NAMRADJA, 2015, p. 18). Although, fiction

will not give us the whole story about social justice, but it can be a bridge both to a vision of justice and to the social enactment of that vision. Telling the slave stories in neo-form provides a method to resist the injustice of maintaining errors in history, or forgetting history altogether. (NAMRADJA, 2015, p. 18)

Though there are authors that discuss the limitation of sectioning the genre after gender, such as Keizer (2004), Patton (2008), on the other hand, argues that, among other

---

<sup>6</sup> Original text: "Mesmo reconhecendo a relevância das *neo-slave narratives* escritas por homens, Beaulieu (1999) argumenta que a contribuição das mulheres ao gênero é inestimável. Ao dar voz a histórias outrora silenciadas, essas escritoras contestam tanto a História quanto crenças e representações populares sobre as mulheres negras, o que contribui para o empoderamento destas dentro e fora do texto e contexto literário." (SILVA, 2017, p. 52-53)

writers, Toni Morrison uses this genre as a way to “rememory”<sup>7</sup> a broader perception of African American identity within the enslavement context. “In other words, these writers recognize the limitations of verisimilitude and seek to reform our view of the past in order to “compel readers to embrace an expansive, imaginative, and liberating representation of slavery” (PATTON, 2008, p. 880). Patton also states that “despite the various approaches taken by postmodern slave narratives, these texts share a ‘narrative/ideology of resistance in the face of oppression’ (PATTON, 2008, p. 881).

Patton ends her discussion defending that the ways to perceive the continued significance slavery has on the cultural aspects of the African American communities “is clearly not an issue that writers like Morrison, Johnson, J. [...] will allow us to pass on; instead, they are insisting that we grapple with our history of slavery and its lingering effects” (PATTON, 2008, p. 883). Neo-slave narratives is a great literary tool to address such relevant matters in our cultural and political society based on this statement, Namradja (2015) points *A Mercy* (2008) as neo-slave narrative, “it is a historical novel which concerns itself with slavery in the New World and resembles the original slave narratives” (NAMRADJA, 2015, p. 79). And even though there’s a resemblance to original slave narratives present, there are characteristics that place the novel in the genre neo-slave narratives. To better understand these shared characteristics, we amplify this discussion in the next section.

### 1.1. *A MERCY*: CHARACTERISTICS OF NEO-SLAVE NARRATIVES GENRE IN THE NOVEL

This research is not a pioneer in stating that *A Mercy* (2008) is a neo-slave narrative. One of the first characteristics of neo-slave narratives that *A Mercy* (2008) presents lies in the fact that it has multiple narrators voices from the enslaved point of view. According to Rushdy’s (1997) the narrative voice is an important element that helps categorize the genre. This novel presents the fourth feature of neo-slave novels, in which the writing loosely reimagines the original slave narrative with first-person narrator, but in discontinuous voices and with metafictional gestures that references other points of the narrative discussed by other character’s perspectives. Namradja (2015) proposes that *A Mercy* is also supposedly revisioning some aspects of neo-slave narratives.

The first aspect of this revisioning is the representation of sexuality, in the novel it presents a deeper aspect of black women’s sexuality: their search for loving connections,

---

<sup>7</sup> Rememory: the act of complimenting ancestral memories with reimagination. This concept will be developed in the next section.

“One of the most common topics for neo-slave narratives is the element of romance and sexuality in the (female) slaves’ lives [...] *A Mercy* does not hold a lot of romance, but loving connections are sought after by all the characters” (NAMRADJA, 2015. p. 76)”

In Florens case, for instance, her seek for loving connections leads her to craving the blacksmith’s love and attention, which makes her think she has found someone to devote her love to. However, she relates way too much her relationship with him to her relationship to her mother, but lastly, she can not keep his affection:

Florens replaces the love from her mother with the love she receives from the blacksmith, because she associates him with the safety and refuge of the family and home that she lost when her mother abandoned her. Indeed, she sees his black skin [...] as proof of the authenticity of their connection. (NAMRADJA, 2015, p. 79)

This leads to the second aspect of understanding the topic of sexuality in neo-slave narratives, as “usually presents itself in women who take ownership of their sexuality, this is not always the case for the women in *A Mercy*” (NAMRADJA, 2015. p 76). In the novel, the take is on black women’s sexuality that faces the horrors of sexual abuses they suffered in the enslavement process:

By subtly describing the horror of sexual abuse Morrison not only portrays what happens but also condemns it (Babb 157). Furthermore, she gives more depth to (the consequences of) sexual abuse. In *A Mercy*, rape is used as a method to dominate women (Sagawa and Robbins 13), young girls can become victims of perverted (though never clarified) plans of owners, and even religious leaders are not exempt from forcing themselves upon defenceless women (Babb 157). (NAMRADJA, 2015. p 77)

The novel proposes a walk in the “interior lives” of the characters, which can be described as the character’s perceptions, thoughts, feelings and traumas, for instance when Florens wonders about freedom: “Standing there between the beckoning wall of perfume and the stag I wonder what else the world may show me” (MORRISON, 2008, p. 70). The proposal is to debate themes that were much compactualized in the old slave narratives to make it more palatable for the white readers. Morrison deliberates that in her experience, on the other hand, as a black woman writer not much than a hundred years later after emancipation, she has a pretty different exercise: “my job is to rip that veil drawn over ‘proceedings too terrible to relate’” (MORRISON, 1995, p. 91)

Morrison defends that her work relies on recollections, hers and others’, to guide her writing, yet approaching these sufferings and ‘interior lives’ were hardly acknowledged before Morrison. “Memory weighs heavily in what I write, in how I begin and in what I find to be significant”, and she states “but memories and recollections won’t give one total access to the unwritten interior of these people. Only the act of the imagination can help me” (MORRISON, 1995, p. 91-92). This is what we call rememory.

*A Mercy* takes place in a scenario where race was not a determinant factor for social status yet, as the story is set in 1600 before the division of the states of America. Morrison in her interview to Charlie Rose in 2008 says she wanted to place herself in a black enslaved girl's shoes where the color of her skin was not a theme pointed by racism, so she focused on a period of time that preceded the laws, and rather the church is the one that birthed racism using their religious beliefs as excuse; so, she writes in a space where race is separated from slavery:

This gradual process is a corruption of a culture that is based on economic values and 'undermines the human value of all races, classes, genders, and sexualities'. By implementing that corruption in her novel on different levels, for example through the story of *Minha Mãe*, Jacob Vaark, and the indentured servants, Morrison shows that early America was not yet a place where race determined your status'. (NAMRADJA, 2015. p 81)

Meanwhile, the bigger issue for the plot of the narrative is the separation of the family. Florens is deeply marked by the image of her mother insisting for Jacob to take her away, and the fact that she does not know why. Morrison also adds in her interview that it "accounts for her [Florens] neediness and sense that there's always somebody getting rid of her" (MORRISON, 2008) <sup>8</sup>. Morrison's intention was to never let Florens learn that information because that's what enslavement does, it cuts ties and rips off the identity of oneself, as we can observe from the following quote:

No, she can't learn that. She'll never know because that's what that kind of enslavement is, her mother was a slave in Maryland. And the big problem of the problems, the supreme one was the separation of family members. She doesn't know what happened to her daughter and her daughter never learns why her mother, you know, send her away. (MORRISON, 2008)

The characters in the novel come from different backgrounds and experiences, highlighting the complexities of their relationships and the harsh realities of this time period. The fact that *minha mãe* doesn't have a name addressed to her, enhances the idea that she was taken as less than a person, coming from the concept that without a name one lacks identity, and without an identity the individual doesn't 'exist'. This is a recurrent theme in the novel, as the other black characters in the novel also don't have a proper name addressed to them, like the blacksmith, for instance. The only black character besides Florens that is named is Sorrow – which later chooses to change her name at the end of the narrative when she embraces freedom and decides to be called Complete. We can perceive that the dehumanization process for these characters achieved its' aim, which is to empty humanity out of their individualities.

---

<sup>8</sup> MORRISON, Toni. Toni Morrison on her new novel, "A Mercy" about a young child and slavery of all kinds in early America. [S.I]: © Charlie Rose Llc, 2008. P&B. Disponível em: <https://charlierose.com/videos/12082>. Acesso em: 18 set. 2023.

Additionally, the narrative style is nonlinear and the narrators often change, configuring it as palimpsest narrative, a narrative technique which consists in multilayered storytelling, an important characteristic of neo-slave narrative. As it switches between the narrative voices, we get familiarized with each character's storyline, expanded by Roynon (2015) with his intertextual reading proposal. *A Mercy* is also a "prose that is in a constant palimpsestic relationship with texts that precede it – the Bible; the canonical histories and literary works about colonial America; the slave narratives; the writings of Milton, of Blake, and of Wordsworth, to name but a few" (ROYNON, 2013 p 81).

Hence, the first chapter is narrated by Florens, and the last one is narrated by *Minha mãe*. The symbolism behind this is a proposal for the reader to understand what *minha mãe's* intentions were when sending Florens away, and what she was trying to say to Florens,

The voice of Florens's mother (we never learn her name), speaking for the first time, is the voice that closes the book. Addressing her words to an absent Florens, she explains that her motivation for giving her to Vaark was the certainty that she would be raped and expresses her belief in literacy as defense" (ROYNON, 2013 p 86).

The opening of the first chapter indicates a story in whispers of a confession and is conducted by Florens. One of the interesting aspects of her narrative is that it is a journal that she writes on the wall of the Jacob Vaark household, a farm in Virginia where she was taken to when she was separated from her mother. The act of writing on the walls, telling her story in the house where she was enslaved is an act of resistance in itself, decolonial in fact, which according to Hollanda (2020) means works that proposes "prioritizing the contestation of the colonality of knowledge" (HOLLANDA, 2020, p. 13, our translation)<sup>9</sup>. This contest lies in the fact that this is a story narrated by slaves, we hear stories from voices that we never heard before: "Sudden I am remembering. You won't read my telling. You read the world but not the letters of talk. You don't know how to. Maybe one day you will learn" (MORRISON, 2008. p 140). She's stating that her story and her life experiences matter, and even if she writes with one reader in mind (the blacksmith, her love interest), and as a matter of fact someone that doesn't know how to read, she has left her mark on that farm as much as the farm left a mark on her. Florens' words, her story written in the walls, and her determination to find her true self are a response to the attempts made so many times to silence her by the system that she was obliged to live under. Which links Florens narrative voice to Rushdy's (1997) categorization of neo-slave narrative: a story narrated by an enslaved black woman about her own experiences from her own point of view.

---

<sup>9</sup> Original text: "privilegiando a contestação à colonialidade do saber".

This also interacts with Namradja (2015) dissertation, where she points that while both sought freedom and identity, male slaves focused on literacy and self-assertion whereas female slaves generally emphasized family and caregiving as central elements of their identities and struggles for freedom. Even though literacy was not top priority for female slaves, it was Florens first element of security in her path towards freedom:

For the male slaves the three stages were literacy-identity-freedom. For the female slaves the stages were family-identity-freedom. The neo-slave narratives have broken with that tradition. [...] By showing the female slaves as full, motherly women, instead of genderless objects, the neo-slave narrative genre celebrates “the heroic status of the enslaved mother” and thereby can inspire all contemporary black women. (NAMRADJA, 2015, p. 17-18)

In the novel, despite still being naive at the beginning of the narrative, Florens is very much aware of her own surroundings. Even though Florens’s personality develops throughout the novel, she begins her narrative with important indagations about the signs she perceives around herself, but most importantly how none of it is by accident. “Stranger things happen all the time everywhere. You know, I know you know. One question is who is the responsible? Another is can you read?” (MORRISON, 2008, p 3).

Silva and Paulino (2022), in a comparative study between *Ponciá Vicencio* and *A Mercy*, posit that the blacksmith, as the personification of the Orisha Ogun, is the one who could provide Florens with new perspectives in life. After her turbulent relationship with the character, “she could find her own freedom, her self-love and her progress, because Ogun is capable of changing perspectives, and showing new ways of doing things. It is after this altercation that Florens becomes ‘wilderness [...] Unforgiven. Unforgiving. [...] Free’ (SILVA e PAULINO, 2022, p. 145). The development of the character can be seen in these two questions, which evoke critical thinking from the reader, like a signal inviting them to perceive what is in between the lines. When Florens asks who is responsible and does not address exactly what for, she leaves up to the reader to interpret. We chose to read those questions as meaning: Who is responsible for her enslavement? Who is responsible for her being separated from her mother? All questions that the character does not have a direct and certain answer. But the readers do. We understand who is responsible for their enslavement, but most importantly, we understand that having these questions is what puts Florens in motion toward her own understanding of freedom.

The second question highlights the importance of reading, not only the words, but also the signs that surround her. As Florens herself points out, she too has trouble reading the signs, and as she doesn’t know where to begin telling her own story, she goes back to start, back to when she was still with her mother, back to when she was taught how to read – words.



She introduces the “Reverend Father”, the one responsible for teaching how to read: “We are baptized and can have happiness when this life is done. The Reverend Father tells us that. Once every seven days we learn to read and to write.” Florens also adds “He is forbidden to do that but he teaches us anyways watching out for wicked Virginians and Protestants who want to catch him.” (MORRISON, 2008, p. 6). It is relevant to learn where Florens and her mother learned how to read, because if it wasn’t for the rebellious act of the reverend to teach them how to decipher written language, one important aspect of the story, the storytelling, wouldn’t be possible once she is writing her own story on walls. We acknowledge the significance of orality in the passage of old stories, but as our focus is on this shared link by mother and daughter on literacy, writing holds the power to let this connection endure time.

Additionally, this learning process can be seen as a connection that she shares with her mother, a privilege many enslaved black women hadn’t had the opportunity to. Although there are no passages in the narrative that corroborates the idea that Florens was intentionally aware of this connection to her mother through writing, we imply that such a bond exists. This connection can be noticed when Florens writes with the blacksmith in mind, as he is the addressee of her message, even though he does not know how to read. We suggest that, in the moment of the writing, Florens has also her mother in mind as a secondary addressee, despite knowing that *minha mãe* will never read it. We came to that conclusion because as Namradja (2015) posits there is a replacement of Floren’s love from *minha mãe’s* love to the blacksmith’s, there is an unresolved issue between them that has to come to an end together. And here lies an important connection, in the last chapter, *Minha mãe* gains the narrative voice. She writes to Florens knowingly that she will never have the chance to talk to her daughter personally due to the imprisonment of their bodies by slavery, so she runs to the connection she holds with her daughter. And for that she streams of conscious directly to Florens, in hope she learns her mother’s wishes for her:

I hoped if we could learn letters somehow someday you could make you way. Reverend father was full of kindness and bravery and said it was what God wanted no matter if they finned him, imprisoned him or haunted him down with gunfire for it as they did to the other priests who taught we to read. He believed we would love God more if we knew the letters to read by. I don’t know that. What I know is that there is magic in learning. (MORRISON, 2008, p. 163)

There can be seen a parallel that Morrison makes between the Yorubá cosmology and Christianity. For mother and daughter, the conditions that the Reverend Father proposed to teach them how to read are something they don’t care much about – this supposed salvation, coming from this condemnation perspective of faith imposed by the European colonizers. Instead, mother and daughter did share an ancestral feeling of connection, an intangible force

that linked them. For instance, *minha mãe* appears in Florens' dreams always with something to say that her daughter wouldn't understand: "I quiet down. That is a better dream than a *minha mãe* standing near with her little boy. In those dreams she is always wanting to tell me something. Is stretching her eyes. Is working her mouth. I look away from her." (MORRISON, 2008, p. 101). It is also important to notice the Christians depicted in her novel. It shows us a very perceptive depiction of the colonizers' attempts to impose their faith. On the other hand, as Silva e Paulino pointed in their research,

One of Morrison's aesthetic goals is to highlight traces of African religions and cultural practices that survived the Atlantic slave trade in the western world. Also, even though many cultural traces were suppressed during colonization, many others remained alive in the African descendants' consciousness. (SILVA e PAULINO 2022, p. 142)

One of those traces is the remaining African cosmology presented in Morrison's piece. One of the ways that one can notice this theme in *A Mercy* is also on the aspect of perception of time. By quoting Leda Maria Martins and Luiz Rufino, Silva and Paulino (2022, p. 136) affirm that "according to the perception of time in Yoruba cosmology, the conception of timeline is not linear, but it has a format that can be associated with a spiral for time is a continuous repetition". This non-linear perception of time can be seen in *minha mãe's* narrative style, where past, present and possible future meet. As the time is a continuous repetition, her mother's story passes the general idea of why enslavement is so nocive, but for Florens to understand that, she had to go through her own path of discovery. Florens also shares this narrative style, where she mixes stories and memories.

*Minha mãe* addresses the story of her imprisonment, enslavement, and even mentions the middle passage, another aspect of neo-slave narratives. She starts with her family separation:

Insults had been moving back and forth to and fro for many seasons between the king of we families and the king of others. I think men thrive on insults over cattle, women, water, crops. Everything heats up and finally the men of their families burn we houses and collect those they cannot kill or find for trade. (MORRISON, 2008, p. 163)

*Minha mãe* describes scarcely, and here comes reality, not because Morrison was avoiding to write about the Middle Passage, but according to Spillers (1987) we know very little of what it was to black people to be transported in the conditions they were in written history. And all of the dehumanization process they have endured while surviving such horrendous conditions. Thus, we have Morrison propose to reimagine through rememory, and let her character speak for herself, yet without filling all the gaps: "Sometimes we sang. Some of we fought. Mostly we slept or wept. Then the whitened men divided we and placed we in

canoes. We come to a house made to float on the sea. (MORRISON, 2008, p 164)” As *minha mãe* continues in her brief divagation about a part of her past, she addresses when the slave ship lands:

When the canoe heeled, some of we jumped, others were pulled under and we did not see their blood swirl until we alive ones were retrieved and placed under guard. We are put into the house that floats on the sea and we saw for the first time rats and it was hard to figure out how to die. Some of we tried; some of we did. Refusing to eat the oiled yam. Strangling we throat. Offering we bodies to the sharks that follow all the way night and day. I know it was their pleasure to freshen us with a lash but I also saw it was their pleasure to lash their own. Unreason rules here. Who lives who dies? (MORRISON, 2008, p 164)

The absentminded but deeply traumatized undertone in this excerpt shows how brilliantly Morrison used her narrative style to show the scars left by enslavement, another characteristic of neo-slave narrative, as pointed in the former section. It is also important to acknowledge that the ache of the black bodies was caused by white bodies. So in this sense, we have a telling of the side of the history by the ones that have been marginalized that shocks the ones that created the power imbalance, in the first place.

Morrison’s narrative style in *A Mercy* brings out many shared characteristics with neo-slave narratives. And as this genre is within the broader category of novel, it’s important to understand how the author takes her work. For the author, novels have a function, as herself pointed out in her text *Rootedness: The ancestor as foundation* (MORRISON, 1984) it can be either to teach manners to a new forming social class – addressing the context in which novels presented itself as a literary genre – the middle class, but also to pass on stories.

To observe Morrison's narrative style is to notice that she also leaves questions open, and certain silences in her prose; it's for the reader to bring along their own experiences to the text, a text that also has a narrator that is supposed to be felt, not identified. A narration that brings the presence of the active reader, like a chorus from a choir in which everybody sings along, “Meaning the community or the reader at large, commenting on the action as it goes ahead.” (MORRISON, 1984, p. 60) Another relation to the many narrative voices in the same novel.

Here one can notice a primary characteristic of neo-slave narratives, those are novels that leave a message, a testimony of experience and guidance, like the slave narratives, but without the autobiographical aspect. Nevertheless, Morrison’s work dialogues with the reader, the community represented in the novel, and so on, because it must have some political sense in it. Art is not detached from the reality in which it was created. And as she does that, she uses the tools she has available for her with the literary genre neo-slave narrative – a tool developed by black women writers that came before her to address the many aspects of the

experiences of black women in the enslavement process and the heritage of that trauma on their ancestry that still has effects on modern society. Morrison states that, “the best art is political and you ought to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time.” (MORRISON, 1984, p. 64) And within this community sense, of telling a story that is shared by many unheard voices is where Morrison wrote *A Mercy*.

In sum, in this chapter we comprehended the four types of neo-slave narratives according to Rushdy (1997) and later amplified by Beaulieu (1999) and Namradja (2015). Understanding that this genre is an opportunity to dialogue with slave stories and the effects of slavery on modern society, we presented characteristics in *A Mercy* that not only corroborates with this genre proposal, but also contributes to the amplification of the thematics approached in this narrative style. The main characteristic is the reimagination of these past lives through rememory, but mostly concerning black women’s sexuality in a much more internal perception.

## 2 BLACK WOMEN AND THE ENSLAVEMENT PROCESS

In studies on black enslavement in the Americas over the past five decades, according to Davis (1981), one could hardly find works dedicated specifically to understanding black women's experiences coming from their own voices. According to Angela Davis' discussion in *Women, Race and Class* the depiction of Black women in many of these studies, which were mainly produced by white academics, followed the stereotype of the “typical female slave [as] a house servant—either a cook, maid, or mammy for the children in the “big house”” (DAVIS, 1981, p. 9). Davis additionally states:

[...] As is so often the case, the reality is actually the diametrical opposite of the myth. Like the majority of slave men, slave women, for the most part, were field workers. While a significant proportion of border-state slaves may have been houseservants, slaves in the Deep South—the real home of the slavocracy—were predominantly agricultural workers (DAVIS, 1981, p. 9)

Presenting black women as a body to work is a way to minimize the experiences they endured during the enslavement process. This is a consequence of the continued dehumanization process racist academia of the late nineteenth century perpetuated by presenting black women's experiences in the enslavement system under stereotypical misrepresentations (DAVIS, 1981). As the epistemological choice of this research is to listen to these marginalized voices, it is necessary to be aware of a few other aspects when dealing with such narratives.

In bell hooks' studies titled *Ain't I a Woman?*, the author firstly addresses that “sexism was an integral part of the social and political order white colonizers brought with them from their European homelands, and it was to have a great impact on the fate of enslaved black women” (hooks, 1982, p. 15). Being so, hooks' research brings to light some detailed examples of some of the same issues Davis (1981) addresses in her works, all of which evoke a resonance upon the reconstruction of this part of history from the perspective of women of color.

Even though black women received the same treatment as men in the field, “when they could be exploited, punished and repressed in ways suited only for women, they were locked into their exclusively female roles” (DAVIS, 1981, p. 9). Thus, there are two prominent examples of the abuses black women endured that are primarily connected to their gender. To support this statement, the autobiographical novel *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs – an important historical document from the 19th century that provides valuable insights into the harsh reality of slavery faced by black women – illustrates a few examples mentioned by Davis (1981).

The first example of the issues black women faced that addressed primarily their gender regards the decades preceding the Civil War of the United States, where Black women became “valuable” to their slave owners for their fertility, in this way, “genetic reproduction becomes, then, not an elaboration of the life-principle in its cultural overlap, but an extension of the boundaries of proliferating properties” (SPILLERS, 1987, p. 75). This way, slave owners would sell away the children, once they would carry the status of the mother. *Partus sequitur ventrem* refers to the legal principle that conveyed the status of slavery from a mother to her child. This Latin phrase was commonly used by American colonies based on slave ownership laws, and it roughly translates to “that which is brought forth follows the womb”. It's important to note that these colonial-era regulations foreshadowed the more expansive and cruel slave codes that emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries, especially in the Southern states of the United States.

Moreover, despite the exaltation of motherhood of the nineteenth century, it didn't embrace black women, who were treated as “breeders - animals whose monetary value could be precisely calculated in terms of their ability to multiply their numbers” (DAVIS, 1981, p. 10). Consequently, these enslaved black women did not have any legal claims on their children, those that often were taken away from them to be sold and moved to places they would never hear from, as Jacobs describes in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*:

The crisis of my fate now came so near that I was desperate. I shuddered to think of being the mother of children who should be owned by my old tyrant. I knew that as soon as a new fancy took him, his victims were sold far off to get rid of them; especially if they had children. I had seen several women sold, with babies at the breast. He never allowed his offspring by slaves to remain long in sight of himself and his wife. (JACOBS, 1861, p. 37)

Morrison in her work *A Mercy* (2008) enhances this concept by suggesting that, despite the lack of control black women had over their children during the era of slavery, they found various unknown ways to, in fact, influence as much as they could in the best probability for their children's future, so they could have different possibilities from their mothers. For instance, in the novel, the character *minha mãe* holds the narrative voice for the first time in the last chapter, and the very first line of hers explains her concerns about the safety of her daughter, once keeping her daughter Florens with her, in a same place where she would be vulnerable to future abuses, was not the type of future she wanted for Florens.

She addresses exactly the sickening malice *Senhor* and *Senhora* D'Ortega (slaveholders) had toward Florens: “There was no protection. None. Certainly not with your vice for shoes. It was as though you were hurrying up your breasts and hurrying also the lips of an old married couple” (MORRISON, 2008, pp. 162-163). And added how she even tried

to seek help from others: “Understand me. There was no protection and nothing in the catechism to tell them no. I tried to tell Reverend Father” (MORRISON, 2008, pp. 162-163). But as this attempt is frustrated, she turns to the solution she finds closer to her possibilities to protect her child from the same faith she had: send her away. And it’s important to highlight that in this case sending Florens away with the “tall man” – the man described by *Minha mãe* as the one that she begged to take Florens with him, Jakob Vaark – to quit the slaveholder’s debt felt safer than keeping her near *Senhor* and *Senhora*, but it was based on a perception, she still couldn’t be sure if it would work. “There is no protection but there is difference. You stood there in those shoes and the tall man laughed” (MORRISON, 2008, p. 166). *Minha mãe* needed a signal of hope.

Her noting of this difference, that the tall man saw an infant in her child, instead of a body to be abused, and this hope she felt because she didn’t know for sure, how could be sure of anything? Slavery wouldn’t give any guarantees. Influenced the choice she made, based on what she had, in which the agility she took action was decisive. She acted as she needed to, fast as needed to send her daughter away from the danger of the enslaved life near her. *Minha mãe* knew that she had no power to protect her child, but she took the opportunity she got to do so, even though Florens never got the chance to understand why her mother acted the way she did. Even though she had no guarantees of her child having a better life.

This leads to the second example of the horrors black women faced that was directly connected to gender that needs to be addressed sexual coercion as a form to dehumanize black women. “Rape, in fact, was an uncamouflaged expression of the slaveholder’s economic mastery and the overseer’s control over Black women as workers” (DAVIS, 1881, p. 10). As one of the proposals of neo-slave narratives is also to bring forward the untold truth about the abuses white people committed against black people, specifically black women, Morrison illustrates in her narrative the abuse *Minha mãe* endured once she arrived in the New World.

“It was too dark to see any of them. They came at night and took we three including Bess to a curing shed. Shadows of men sat on barrels, then stood. They said they were told to break we in.” (MORRISON, 2008, p. 163). Even though it’s not addressed the specific race of her abusers, it’s implicit that white people are accountable for the mistreatment of black women; slave owners were the very first to encourage such behavior, mainly for the ‘valuable’ outcomes of the rape: the children that would come from the act would be sold away. “Afterwards, the men who were told to break we in apologized. Later an overseer gave each of us an orange. And it would have been all right. It would have been good both times, because the results were you and your brother.” (MORRISON, 2008, p. 166).

*Minha mãe* was aware of her surroundings as well, and the abuses she was exposed to, she didn't want it to happen to her daughter, "To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below." (MORRISON, 2008, p. 163). And even though she had little to no power over it, she performed against a stereotypical view that can no longer be unnoticed: "In fact, in the eyes of the slaveholders, slave women were not mothers at all; they were simply instruments guaranteeing the growth of the slave labor force." (DAVIS, 1981, p. 10). For this character to have come to this decision, acted on it, and protected her daughter as she did, was Morrison's way of saying that no, black women weren't as lenient as often described. There was a subversion against the system that they lived under strict rigidity living within them, and the ways they found to resist and escape were so full of wisdom that often went unnoticed by white people.

Since the Middle Passage torture was used as the main aspect to dehumanize black people, hooks (1982) asserts that even after the same physical tortures black women endured alongside black men, another step the white colonizer took to conclude their process of dehumanization was to put African women naked and unchained aboard the ship as a form of oppression by making them vulnerable to sexual assaults, once "Rape was a common method of torture slavers used to subdue recalcitrant black women" (hooks, 1982, p. 18).

Jacobs (1861) endorsed this statement in her accounts. The way colonizers used rape as an excuse to comply an obedient behavior from black women, and the rage it inspired instead: "When separations come by the hand of death, the pious soul can bow in resignation, and say, "Not my will, but thine be done, O Lord!" But when the ruthless hand of man strikes the blow, regardless of the misery he causes, it is hard to be submissive" (JACOBS, 1861, p. 25).

When addressing the sexual abuses black women suffered in slavery, one must acknowledge the repercussions it caused in their lives. "A devaluation of black womanhood occurred as a result of the sexual exploitation of black women during slavery that has not altered in the course of hundreds of years." (hooks, 1982. p 53). Taking into account that the American colonies were fundamentalist Christians, it is intrinsic that they portrayed women "as an evil sexual temptress, the bringer of sin into the world" (hooks, 1982, p. 29). Still, according to hooks, religious leaders - predominantly white men - would preach that sexual lust originated from women, and men were just their 'victims', intensifying and stimulating the anti-woman sentiment. By making this their main narrative, it became more difficult for abolitionists to discuss rape, instead, they used the word "prostitution"



But the use of the word prostitution to describe mass sexual exploitation of enslaved black women by white man not only deflected attention away from the prevalence of forced sexual assault, it lent further credibility to the myth that black females were inherently wanton and therefore responsible for rape. (hooks, 1982. p 34)

As an ongoing victim of colonization, *Minha mãe* also roughly addresses the topic of blaming the victim for the assault. This portrays the despicable effects of colonization in her being. In this case, Florens going through puberty, a natural aspect of human body development in which under the conditions of slavery white men placed it as an object of desire; again, addressing the dehumanization of young black girls: “I know their tastes. Breasts provide the pleasure more than simpler things. Yours are rising too soon and are becoming irritated by the cloth covering your little girl chest. And they see and I see them see. No good follows (...)” (MORRISON 2008, p162). It is important to notice that this becomes a relevant aspect of the origins of the hypersexualization black women face still nowadays, and it comes not only from white men, but thanks to their stimuli also black men depersonalize black women’s bodies.

This put black women in a position where they couldn’t turn to any group of men for protection, once they were vulnerable to assault by any man regardless of race. Lastly, in a desperate attempt to survive under better conditions, black women turned to their mistresses, but they only encountered rage coming from these white women, which held them accountable for the sexual abuses their husbands used to commit. This is also well exemplified by Jacobs (1861), when she asks her reader

[...] where could I turn for protection? No matter whether the slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as her mistress. In either case, there is no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even from death; all these are inflicted by fiends who bear the shape of men. The mistress, who ought to protect the helpless victim, has no other feelings towards her but those of jealousy and rage. The degradation, the wrongs, the vices, that grow out of slavery, are more than I can describe. (JACOBS, 1861, p 19)

In the narrative this concept is expanded to Native American women, and it’s Lina the one who receives most of Rebekka’s storms of rage and jealousy: “so when Rebekka found Lina already there, waiting outside the one-room cottage her new husband had built for them, she bolted the door at night and would not let the raven-haired girl with impossible skin sleep anywhere near.” (MORRISON, 2008, p. 75)

Evoquing hooks (1982) once again, the author points that white women’s actions towards black women falls back into the fundamentalist Christian teaching they have received:

White women held black women responsible for rape because they had been socialized by the 19th-century sexual morality to regard woman as sexual temptress.

This same sexual morality was adopted by slaves. Fellow slaves often pitied the lot of sexually exploited females but did not see them as blameless victims. (HOOKS, 1982. p 37)

Many other tortures made present in the lives of encaptured African women and men, all aimed the destruction of human dignity to succeed by brutally coercing "African people to repress their awareness of themselves as free people and to adopt the slave identity imposed upon them" (hooks, 1982, p. 19). Additionally, it's important to address that the gender differentiations wasn't encouraged by the slaveholders among the enslaved black women and men:

The slave system also discouraged male supremacy in Black men. Because husbands and wives, fathers and daughters were equally subjected to the slavemasters' absolute authority, the promotion of male supremacy among the slaves might have prompted a dangerous rupture in the chain of command (DAVIS, 1981, p 10)

Once one understands these few aspects of the enslavement process through the lenses of black women experience, we must learn how this information is important for the development of the identity formation of black women, as they multiple times has been placed in so many controlling images that they have the right to redefine themselves accordingly; to build the future we must learn about the past.

Davis (1998) obliges the significance of having the historic retelling of black women's experiences, as we set the records straight not only will it be helpful to expand our knowledge about slavery and maybe achieve a better historical accuracy, but also to bring to light black womens' constant battle for emancipation. By incorporating the practice of attentively engaging with narratives shared by Black women concerning their experiences, we strive to achieve a deeper and more nuanced understanding of their experiences and the generational effect that slavery has left. In addition, Hill Collins (2000) claims that:

The voices of these African-American women are not those of victims but of survivors. Their ideas and actions suggest that not only does a self-defined, group-derived Black women's standpoint exist, but that its presence has been essential to U.S. Black women's survival. (HILL COLLINS, 2000, p. 98)

After all the dehumanizing tortures black women went through, one of its continuous consequences on their lives that still lingers as a heritage of that is the controlling images created by white people to give continuity to oppressing them. Hence, this urgency to learn the oppressed side of history. Once whites created the "race problem"<sup>10</sup> (For a broader definition of white privilege MCINTOSH, Peggy; CLEVELAND, Caitlin. **White privilege:**

---

<sup>10</sup> MCINTOSH, Peggy; CLEVELAND, Caitlin. White privilege: unpacking the invisible knapsack. unpacking the invisible knapsack. 2020. This essay is excerpted from Working Paper 189. "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming To See Correspondences through Work in Women's Studies" (1988). Disponível em: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.30714426>. Acesso em: 7 nov. 2023.

unpacking the invisible knapsack. unpacking the invisible knapsack. 2020. This essay is excerpted from Working Paper 189: "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming To See Correspondences through Work in Women's Studies" - 1988) by abusing and stigmatizing black bodies and excusing slavement with religion, it's also white people's obligation to step back and be open to relearn everything about colonization and its effects on modern day society from other perspectives – the decolonial perspective. Most importantly, how black women have in many ways responded to those oppressions throughout history, as we listen to black women talk about their own experiences in a much deeper and sensitive way using art as a tool to understand themselves.

By insisting on self-definition, Black women question not only what has been said about African-American women but the credibility and the intentions of those possessing the power to definition. When Black women define ourselves, we clearly reject the assumption that those in positions granting them the authority to interpret our reality are entitled to do so. Regardless of the actual content of Black women's self-definitions, the act of insisting on Black female self-definition validates Black women's power as human subjects. (HILL COLLINS, 2000, p. 114)

With the music, and/or literature, they have been discussing topics concerning the understanding of themselves outside these imposed controlling images – according to Hill Collins (2000) some of those controlling images are “mammies, matriarchs, welfare mothers, mules, or sexually denigrated women” (HILL COLLINS, 2000, p. 98). The main point relies on the irony of that, as pointed out by Hill Collins most black women do not identify themselves with any of those controlling images. And through literature, dialoguing with many characteristics of neo-slave narratives that's what Toni Morrison brings in her novel.

In *A mercy*, the author made a historical research for the ambiance of her novel, and as very little she could find, she felt the urge to explore the internal mind of her characters. So, she used rememory as a tool, to revisit history and complement it by reimagining a scenario in which race wasn't the defining factor yet, but soon enough got well established in the roots of American colonialism. The contributions that this novel leaves to understanding black women's search for the self are immense. As the narrative moves along, we can see the main character blooms within herself, for she had her body imprisoned, but never her mind. And for us as readers to see her story have such development within herself it's a testimony of self-liberation. By the end of the narrative, we can understand alongside Florens that independent self-definitions empower Black women to be defining themselves is already an act of resistance.

Hence, one of the main aspects for black women to understand themselves is the relationship they have in relation to those surrounding themselves. And who better to support black women than black women? That's Hill Collins take, as she points out that the closest a

black woman will have someone understanding her experiences is another black woman. And the first relationship a black woman has with another black woman is supposedly with her mother. For the purpose of this research, we propose to better understand the impacts of the ruptured relationship of the character Florens with her birth mother, as an illustration of these discussions in literature. Studying these relationships can be a source of motivation to actualize social change. It also highlights the importance of acknowledging that there's no valid way to comprehend the experiences of black women through the lens of a white perspective. Black women are the narrators of their own stories, and they have been sharing their narratives with us for a significant amount of time. The key to understanding the unique perspectives of black women lies in actively listening and giving full attention to their narratives. Without this commitment, it's challenging to claim the establishment of a truly anti-racist society.

## 2.1. THE ROLE OF BLACK MOTHERHOOD IN THE SLAVERY CONTEXT: MOTHER AND DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIP IN *A MERCY*

As we are dealing with a narrative that the plot involves enslavement from the perspective of the enslaved body, deprivation of any kind of discretion is part of the characters's routine, and has a major impact on the characters's storyline. Deprivation only covers half of the information as the enslaved body is made subjects of white possession, and their suffering becomes white people's enjoyment/entertainment (HARTMAN, 1997). In this sense, how can we understand motherhood under such conditions? Where there's no discretion in terms of their own child that the mother can address, or to begin with the possibility to consent for the act that she even hadn't the opportunity to.

In *A Mercy*, "we witness the loss of mother love in not only the central Black figures but in *other mother*<sup>11</sup>/child relationships scarred by the corrupted system." (OTTEN, 2013, p. 85). The scenario for Florens's relationship to motherhood is embraced by two definitions on black enslaved motherhood. The first is presented in her short-term relationship with her blood mother in her infant years, a kind of mothering that was robbed, despite the understanding of Florens at the beginning of the novel, her mother had done what she had – begged for Florens to be taken – because that was the better option. The second can be recognized in Florens' relationship with Lina, the Native American enslaved woman at the Vaark's farm in Virginia where she was taken to. To better understand the impacts of these two relationships on the development of the character, we're parting from the principle that

---

<sup>11</sup> This terminology is proposed by Hill Collins (2000) to address a different kind of mothering agency, the mothers that take care of the children of her community, even though they're not connected by blood.

according to Etienne (2013) studies in *The Evolution of the African American Mother-Daughter Relationship: A Grounded Theory Study*:

Chodorow (1978) stated the mother-child relationship is central to the development of a person's sense of self. [...] Chodorow stated that this early sense of self occurs in relation to another person and can be described as a social and interpersonal relationship. Perhaps one of the first reasons why mothers and daughters experience such a unique relationship is the way in which women have been socialized to treat their daughters. (CHODROW, 1978 apud ETIENNE, 2013, p. 26-27)

Taking her first relationship with her blood mother to better understand, one can notice how deeply scarred Florens is by the memory of her mother begging for her daughter to be taken. Florens in the beginning of the novel was yet to comprehend the reason behind why her mother would do so, but in fact, she never will. To conceptualize this scenario, we can take Spillers' (1987) take on motherhood in the enslavement period; it shows that black women were considered mere subjects from white ownership and breeders to enhance the value of their possession, as we discussed in the prior sections. Spillers highlights that "[...] even though the enslaved female reproduced other enslaved persons, we do not read "birth" in this instance as a reproduction of mothering precisely because the female, like the male, has been robbed of the parental right, the parental function. (SPILLERS, 1987, p 78)

In the narrative context, *minha mãe* has no means to protect, nor to provide for her own child, and in her case, as rape was also prominent to become a reality for her daughter, she opted to do what she could to prevent that from happening. And here is where Morrison juxtaposes Spillers' dialogue. This is a way of assuring that her character, *minha mãe*, tried to offer her daughter a better opportunity if there ever was one, to Florens, even though it meant she would never hear from her daughter again she wanted to provide for her daughter a better destiny than her own, and even if many misunderstood her intentions: "It was not a miracle bestowed by God. It was a mercy. Offered by a human." (MORRISON, 2008, pp. 165-166). Here also lies the explanation of the name of the novel, because according to *Minha mãe's* point of view, what saved Florens was an act of mercy that took her away from the despicable things that awaited her if she had stayed. This forced separation and along with it the deprivation of information between *minha mãe* and Florens is a consequence of slavery, the separation of the family, mothers and daughters is our take, but we also have a brother and sister separation. And to Florens, this rupture, this incomplete information, is something that haunts her throughout the novel. The feeling of abandonment, that someone is always getting away from her, and also a disturbance for not understanding her mother is present in her insecurity; she doubts her mother's intentions, maybe too young to understand, so she doubts her own worth.

The second relationship with motherhood that Florens has is related to the character Lina. Lina, a native American older woman, plays the role of Florens' other mother. When Florens arrived at the Vaark's farm, she met Lina, who mothered her by raising and offering guidance. The feeling of belonging nurtured in this relationship doesn't rely on blood connections. Hill Collins (2000) discusses the importance of this role in African-based communities, but as we're speaking about a broader racial and cultural context, we can also address that there's a similarity in the motherhood concept among women of color displayed in the novel. Thus, the upbringing of Florens wasn't motherless, she had a mother figure to look up to, someone to offer guidance and inspire her sense of self, which means that she had the opportunity to learn what she hadn't learned with her blood mother. But even though Florens had contact with these two different types of mothering, one doesn't annul the other.

When speaking about motherhood in the context of slavery it's important to address that there are many factors that have a direct impact upon it. This is a kind of motherhood that has ruptures and deprivation as its foundation. To better understand these ruptures Spillers points out the African-American experience with the "American Grammar":

[...] an "American grammar" begins at the "beginning", which is really a rupture and a radically different kind of cultural continuation. The massive demographic shifts, the violent formation of a modern African consciousness, that take place on the subsaharan Continent during the initiative strikes which open the Atlantic Slave Trade in the fifteenth century of our Christ, interrupted hundreds of years of black African culture. We write and think, then, about the outcome of aspects of African-American life in the United States under the pressure of those events. (SPILLERS, 1987, p. 68)

This rupture with the connection with ancestry is also part of the dehumanization process imposed on black women by slavery. The loss of this connection with the past has left a big impact on the understanding of identity, once these connections with the past are deeply important for comprehension of self in relation to the other, or how one can perceive community is all based on the cultural aspects present in ones' upbringing. But with this lost information, how can one access this ancestral imaginary? How is this related to the narrative?

To understand the impact of the role of motherhood in this context, it's also important to dissolve certain myths surrounding it, as one of the many controlling images later used to define black women, Spillers also alerts us that one must be careful when addressing these kinds of mothering because it was developed under such delicate conditions:

[...] when we speak of the enslaved person, we perceive that the dominant culture, in a fatal misunderstanding, assigns a matriarchist value where it does not belong; actually misnames the power of the female regarding the enslaved community. Such naming is false because the female could not, in fact, claim her child, and false, once

again, because "motherhood " is not perceived in the prevailing social climate as a legitimate procedure of cultural inheritance. (SPILLERS, 1987, p. 80)

The impact of these ruptures and deprivation in the mother-daughter relationship Florens shared with her mother had been such that it influenced her difficulty in building a strong sense of identity for herself. We take these gaps left by this lost information when addressing certain aspects of black history that can only be rebuilt through rememory is acknowledged by Morrison, and the political aspects of her work speaks for itself.

The author, as a black woman herself, understands the effects slavery has left on our society and implies in her work that black women aim to raise their children to be self-sufficient and always advance a step ahead generation after generation. To bring attention to this motherhood theme approached by Morrison in her novel is to understand that the first relationship a black woman can have with someone that can really understand her is her mother, in most cases; but as slavery intervenes, this cycle is broken. As many scars were left by slavery, motherhood for black women has also been strongly impacted by it:

Weitzman (1979) pointed back to the African Americans' legacy of slavery and the formulation of strong, independent Black women who were forced to become head of the household. It is no doubt that this phenomenon has residual effects today on how African American women socialize their daughters to be self-sufficient, which takes the form of being academically successful and responsible. [...] no matter where an African American girl falls in birth order in the family, she still is raised with the same degree of responsibility placed on her than an African American male is. (ETIENNE, 2013, p. 29)

As a result, black women's perception of this role is quite specific. According to Etienne: "African American women in particular view motherhood as an important role image. Boyd-Franklin (2003) suggested that motherhood for these women is complex and is often a shared activity with other multigenerational women." (ETIENNE, 2013, p. 27). This aspect of community mothering is also discussed by Spillers (1987), and this sense of an entire community raising that child brings the understanding that besides mothering, even after so much has been accomplished, they still have to prepare their children for the racist society they'll live in. Especially for a black mother, she understands that her daughter will endure many difficulties that were left as heritage by slavery on a daily basis, for instance, the objectification of black women that has its roots in the rape that white man used to commit against them as a form of coercion. As discussed in the last section:

Black daughters must learn how to survive the sexual politics of intersecting oppressions while rejecting and transcending these same power relations. In order to develop these skills in their daughters, mothers demonstrate varying combinations of behaviors devoted to ensuring their daughters' survival—such as providing them with basic necessities and protecting them in dangerous environments—to helping their daughters go further than mothers themselves were allowed to go (Joseph 1981, 1984 apud COLLINS, 2000, p 184).

This is represented in *A Mercy*, with this rupture between Florens and her mother preventing her from receiving from her birth mother all of the ancestral knowledge that she needed, for instance her own mother's enslavement story. Florens had no idea of her mother's story, birth place, not even her name:

It is clear that the characters' search for love comes from traumas they have experienced in the past. Morrison especially focuses on the psychological damage that is caused when people are separated by slavery, which is portrayed through the narrative of Florens. She misunderstands her mother's intentions when she is given to Jacob Vaark, which makes her feel unloved and unwanted. These emotions, combined with the lack of her mother's guidance, influence her capability to read other people's intentions as well as the underlying meaning of words (NAMRADJA, 2015, p 78-79)

As she only had an empty space with no explanation about her mother's intentions and it has impacted how she perceived herself, as for her she believes her mother had an unexplainable implication with her shoes. As Hill Collins addresses, "The mother/daughter relationship is one fundamental relationship among Black women. Countless Black mothers have empowered their daughters by passing on the everyday knowledge essential to survival as African-American women" (Joseph 1981; Collins 1987 apud Collins 2000, p 102). Simultaneously, her mother never stopped believing that Florens one day would learn what she was trying to say, according to Eshu's Pedagogy formerly discussed in Silva and Paulino (2022) in the prior chapter, so she tried to communicate through the other ways of telling for her daughter to be listening:

I stayed on my knees. In the dust where my heart will remain each night and every day until you understand what I had to say what I know and long to tell you: to be given dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself is a wicked thing. Oh, Florens. My love. Hear a tua mãe. (MORRISON, 2008, p. 167)

The symbolic aspects of this lost information between mother and daughter in the novel are directly connected to Floren's understanding of freedom, "Florens cannot hear her words, but her mother's poignant gesture of love leads to her daughter's discovery of self and a measure of release." (OTTEN, 2013, p 90) in her own lines, Florens says "I don't know the feeling of or what it means, free and not free. But I have a memory." (MORRISON, 2008, p 69). Which means that she is passing through that strange feeling of not identifying herself without the thing that majored her existence so far, being enslaved: "Suddenly on her own and for the moment without chains, she feels 'A little scare of this looseness. Is this how free feels? I don't like it'" (MORRISON, 2008, p 70 apud OTTEN, 2013, p 90).

This corroborates to the message *minha mãe* wants to pass to Florens is how she feels about having her freedom taken from her, this character knows all the pain of being enslaved, she testimony her family being separated and sold away; she herself was shipped away in the



most despicable conditions to a land where she didn't even know where it was, to be exposed to rape, that led to pregnancy, and when she perceived what could happen to her daughter she chose to protect her and send Florens on her path towards freedom. "Florens cannot hear her [mother's] words, but her mother's poignant gesture of love leads to her daughter's discovery of self and a measure of release." (OTTEN, 2013. p 90). But Florens doesn't know any of that, so she shows a certain fright towards freedom,

Throughout the novel she has several chances to gain freedom, but every time she chooses to remain a slave. It seems as if Florens is afraid of freedom. Perhaps it is because she feels safer when someone else takes care of her and in slavery she feels closest to the security that her mother once provided for her. Or perhaps she just loves the blacksmith more than her freedom. The blacksmith resents her for her voluntary enslavement to him and rejects her (NAMRADJA, 2015. p 81)

By the end of her narrative, Florens addresses her own perception of freedom at last, and that's just for the reader to know, "Earlier she had wondered "how free feels," now, ironically, she gains an anguished freedom from the blacksmith or any owner to find "Me"—a bittersweet victory at best." (OTTEN, 2013, p 90) Her understanding of herself is presented in her understanding of who Florens is based on her own definitions, even though her mother never learns if she really understands what she's been trying to say, Florens learned for herself what freedom is: "I will keep one sadness. That all this time I cannot know what my mother is telling me. Nor can she know what I am wanting to tell her. Mãe, you can have pleasure now because the soles of my feet are hard as cypress." (MORRISON, 2008, p. 161)

Enslavement aimed to dehumanize and depersonalize black bodies to a point where they had no other option but to accept the enslaved position imposed upon them, but in the novel, for Florens to have gained this consciousness took her a long path, and her final statement shows that it's to her personal understanding that to be imprisoned was no good, she herself has come to that conclusion, developing a sense of self despite it all.

### 3 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study purpose was to comprehend the effects of slavery on the mother-daughter relationships depicted in *A Mercy*. For such, we directed to black women academic studies on black women's experience in the slavery period, in which we learned that it was deeply based in the dehumanization of these women and had sexual abuse as the main agent in this process, proposed by white man and coerced to be done also by black man.

As a consequence for facing these traumas continuously, while being blamed for the cruelty and receiving anger from white women, black women's only reliability fell among themselves. For that, we needed to understand that mothering agency in this context works differently, because when it comes to black women's rights over their children there was none. They had no way of interfering in their children's future, as it commonly the child would be sold away from the mother. To offer a different take on this, *A Mercy begins* with this rupture between Florens and her mother, but it invites the reader to learn about a kind of mothering agency that did try what was possible to protect their children, even if the means of doing so was not ideal. Such was the act of *Minha mãe* begging for someone to take her daughter away so she wouldn't suffer the same sexual abuse as herself. In this context, even though she had no guarantees, she believed that Florens would be better away from her, and one day her daughter would understand why she had done so.

This research proposes a place of hearing black women, getting in touch with references on historical aspects of black women in the slavery system, we aim to contribute to the dialogues on race, gender, and the consequences of slavery in the United States. Acknowledging the art manifestations of these stories as a valid starting point to a better understanding of the intersectionality surrounding black women's experience in our modern society is a subject that deserves everyone's attention if we really want to create an anti-racist society.

Additionally, this research demonstrates that black women, in constructing their own identities, draw upon the experiences of Black women during the era of slavery, identifying and distancing themselves from the controlling images imposed on them to create their unique identities. With the discussions presented surrounding *A Mercy*, we found an example of the artistic expression of this historical knowledge upon the construction of self-identity and perception of freedom. It's important to keep researching and studying voices different from the already established eurocentric voices, we will always have parts of history to rewrite, so we must keep opening our scope of research to

perceive and dialogue with these marginalized stories. In conclusion, this research presents the importance of a space of hearing to the histories, experiences and identities of Black women in the context of slavery, to further understand the lasting impact of these narratives in contemporary discussions on race and gender. To further implement in the discussion raised in this research, there's potential to develop subsequent studies on a compared analysis of the different kinds of motherings present in Morrison's narratives.

## REFERENCES

- BEAULIEU, Elizabeth Ann. **Black women writers and the American neo- slave narrative: femininity unfettered.** 1999. Available at: <https://archive.org/details/blackwomenwriter0000beau/page/n1/mode/2up>. Acesso em: 10 de outubro de 2023.
- DAVIS, Angela. **Women, race & class.** New York: Random House, 1981.
- ETIENNE, Toneka R.. **The Evolution of the African American Mother-Daughter Relationship: a grounded theory study.** 2013. 123 f. Tese (Doutorado) - Curso de Filosofia, Walden University, Minneapolis, 2013
- HILL Collins, Patricia. **Black feminist thought: knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment.** New York: Routledge, ed 2, 2000.
- HOLLANDA, Heloisa Buarque de. Introdução. In: HOLLANDA, Heloisa Buarque de (org.). **Pensamento feminista hoje: perspectivas decoloniais.** Rio de Janeiro: Bazar do Tempo, 2020. p. 13-16
- HOOKS, Bell. **AIN'T I A WOMAN: black women and feminism.** Boston: South End Press, 1982.
- JACOBS, Harriet. **Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl.** E-Book Global Grey, 1861. Disponível em: [globalgreybooks.com/incidents-in-the-life-of-a-slave-girl-ebook.html](http://globalgreybooks.com/incidents-in-the-life-of-a-slave-girl-ebook.html). Acesso em: 10 de de setembro de 2023.
- LUDWIG, Sami. Toni Morrison's social criticism. In: TALLY, Justine (ed.). **THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO TONI MORRISON.** New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. p. 125-138.
- MORRISON, Toni. **A mercy.** New York: Knopf, 2008.
- MORRISON, Toni. Rootedness: the ancestor as foundation. In: EVANS, Mari (ed.). **Black women writers: 1950-198.** New York: Anchor/ Doubleday, 1984. p. 339-345.
- MORRISON, Toni. The site of memory. In: ZINSSER, William. **Inventing the Truth: the art and craft of memoir.** 2. ed. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995. p. 83-102.
- NAMRADJA, Regina Behoekoe. **Rewriting History: The Neo-Slave Narrative in the New Millennium.** 2015.
- OTTEN, Terry. 'To Be One or to Have One': 'Motherlove' in The Fiction of Toni Morrison. In: MONTGOMERY, Maxine L. (ed.). **Contested Boundaries: new critical essays on the fiction of toni morrison.** Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013. p. 82-95.
- ROYNON, Tessa. **The Cambridge introduction to Toni Morrison.** New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013

RUSHDY, Ashraf. **Neo-Slave Narrative**. The Oxford Companion to African American Literature. Eds. William L. Andrews, Frances S. Foster, Trudier Harris-Lopez. New York: Oxford UP, 1997, p 533-535.

RYAN, Judylyn S. Language and narrative technique in Toni Morrison's novels. In: TALLY, Justine (ed.). **THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO TONI MORRISON EDITED**. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. p. 151-161.

SILVA, Danielle de Luna e. **Maternagens na diáspora Ameفرicana**: resistência e liminaridade em amada, compaixão e um defeito de cor. 2017. 171 f. Tese (Doutorado) - Curso de Letras, Universidade Federal da Paraíba, João Pessoa, 2017.

SILVA, Danielle de Luna e; PAULINO, Renan Cabral. CROSSROADS BETWEEN AMEFRICAN AUTHORS: eshu, ogun and oshunmare in toni morrison's a mercy and conceição evaristo's ponciá vicencio. **Ilha do Desterro**, Florianópolis, v. 75, n. 2, p. 133-149, maio/agosto de 2022.

SPILLERS, Hortense. **Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book**. Diacritics vol 17, ed 2, 1987, p 65-81.