

Exploring Black Hybrid Self and Identity in *Dessa Rose* and *A Mercy*

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Abstracts

This study explores the idea of black hybrid identity in African American literature, focusing at the narratives of *Dessa Rose* with the aid of Sherley Anne Williams and *A Mercy* via Toni Morrison. By employing Homi Bhabha's principle of hybridity and Michel Foucault's framework of electricity and discourse, the analysis delves into the complex procedures of identity formation within the context of slavery and its enduring effect. The observe highlights the dynamic nature of identity, emphasizing the continued negotiation and edition of cultural and historic influences. It also examines the function of reminiscence, storytelling, and resistance in preserving and transmitting black identification. Through an interdisciplinary method, the research underscores the significance of considering unique ancient and social contexts in expertise the formation of hybrid identities.

Keywords: Black hybrid identity, African American literature, Slavery narratives, Cultural memory, Resistance, Identity formation, Historical context.

1. Introduction

The study of black hybrid identity in the narratives of African Americans and the slavery narratives is central to postcolonial and literary criticism. This significance results from the social historical and cultural experiences that has characterized the African Americans especially when it comes to slavery and its effects. Among the theoretical views indispensable to understanding the processes of identity formation in postcolonial world, the theory of hybridity developed by Homi Bhabha has to be mentioned (Bhabha 1994, 2). In the sphere of African American literature, such heterogeneity is expressed in a search for identity between African roots and American traditions on one hand and the presence of the slave legacy, on the other.

Slave and African American stories are also invaluable sources which sheds the light on the psychological, emotional and cultural dimensions of enslavement and its consequences. These narratives, whether historical or fictional, give a voice for the different factors that lead to the black individual formation under structures that subjugate them. According to Toni Morrison, the potency of writers consists in their capacity to familiarize the strange and mystify the familiar' or, in other words, to imagine what is not the self' (Morrison 1992, 15). This imaginative power

enables authors to portray the subtle cultural experience of real and struggled life of African Americans and their dual nature.

Black hybrid identity in these narratives can also be an important contribution to existing race, power and memory discourses. Gilroy elaborates on this matter in his book entitled *The Black Atlantic*, pointing out that African diaspora realm is viewed as the space that is at once domesticated and foreign due to the double consciousness of the black people living in the Western world (Gilroy 1993, 4). Essentially this is true in the case of hybrid identities as people often switch in between cultural domains and operative historical memories. As a result, the narratives explicate the tactics applied by African Americans to fight oppression, maintain culture and create new selves amid racism and prejudice.

The significance of analyzing this black hybrid identity in the narratives of African Americans and the slavery narratives stems from the unique social, historical, and cultural experiences that have characterized the African American community, particularly in relation to the legacy of slavery and its profound impact. The concept of hybridity developed by Homi Bhabha serves as a crucial theoretical lens for understanding the processes of identity formation in the postcolonial world, as it is expressed through the search for identity between African roots, American traditions, and the ever-present shadow of the slave legacy in African American literature (Bhabha 1994, 2).

Slave narratives and African American stories provide invaluable sources that shed light on the psychological, emotional, and cultural dimensions of the enslaved experience and its aftermath. These narratives, whether historical or fictional, give voice to the multifaceted factors that shaped the formation of black individuals under the oppressive structures that subjugated them. As Toni Morrison observes, the power of writers lies in their capacity to "familiarize the strange and mystify the familiar," enabling them to portray the nuanced cultural experiences and dual nature of the African American lived reality (Morrison 1992, 15).

Beyond the character narratives, black hybrid identity in those literary works also can make considerable contributions to broader discourses surrounding race, energy, and collective reminiscence. Gilroy's seminal work, *The Black Atlantic* explores how the African diaspora realm is perceived as a space this is concurrently familiar and foreign, because of the "double cognizance" of the black humans dwelling within the Western global (Gilroy 1993, 4). This concept of double focus is specifically applicable in the case of hybrid identities, as individuals navigate among wonderful cultural domains and operate inside the framework of historical memories.

2. Theoretical Framework

The analysis of black hybrid identification in *Dessa Rose* and *A Mercy* is underpinned by way of two key theoretical frameworks: Homi Bhabha's idea of hybridity and Michel Foucault's thoughts on energy and discourse. These theoretical frameworks, provide the fundamental keys to decoding the complex constructions of identities portrayed within the novels.

Bhabha's concept of hybridity, as proposed within the context of *The Location of Culture* offers crucial insights into the nature of cultural subjectivity inside the postcolonial world. According to Bhabha, cultural identification is not a hard and fast essence however is constructed within a '0.33 area' - the liminal border wherein cultures occupy and contest each other (Bhabha 1994, 36). This notion of the '1/3 space' is specially beneficial while discussing African American identification, as it's far regularly constructed within the space between African roots and American assimilation, with the lingering presence of the slave legacy.

Bhabha's theorization of hybridity demanding situations essentialist notions of cultural purity, as a substitute positing identity formation as a dynamic method of negotiation and adaptation. He argues that the stylistic mimicry of the colonized concern can function a subversive act, a "sharp subversion of the colonizers' ways of being" (Bhabha 1994, 86). This concept of mimicry becomes a vital analytical lens thru which to have a look at the resilience and survival techniques hired by the characters in *Dessa Rose* and *A Mercy*.

Complementing Bhabha's insights, the theoretical framework supplied by way of Michel Foucault's work on strength and discourse offers any other crucial dimension to the analysis of hybrid identity in those novels. Foucault's knowledge of energy as a relational and efficient pressure, instead of merely a repressive one, is particularly helpful in seeking to realize the system of identity formation underneath the oppressive gadget of slavery (Foucault, *History* 1990, 140).

Foucault's idea of "biopower" - the law of populations via institutional practices and discourses - sheds light on how slavery and racism function as systems of manipulate, shaping the very subjectivities of the enslaved (Foucault, *History* 1990, 140). Additionally, his analysis of the connection among power and information illuminates the ways in which racial categories and hierarchies are built and maintained via numerous discursive practices (Foucault, *Discipline* 1995, 27).

When implemented in tandem, the theoretical frameworks of Bhabha and Foucault screen the complicated interaction between cultural hybridity and strength family members. Bhabha's 'third space' may be understood as a website of resistance in opposition to the disciplinary power defined through Foucault, where the characters create new, hybrid identities that defy smooth categorization. Conversely, Foucault's insights into the internalization of power family members can assist elucidate the complex psychological dynamics of hybrid identification formation depicted within the novels.

In applying those theories to the evaluation of *Dessa Rose* and *A Mercy*, it's far important to consider the reviews and variations offered by means of pupils of African American studies. For example, Tina Campt's work on "black feminist theorizing of diaspora" provides a nuanced, gendered perspective on hybridity this is in particular applicable to the girl-centered narratives of Sherley Anne Williams and Toni Morrison (Campt 2006, ninety three).

Similarly, Saidiya Hartman's idea of the "afterlife of slavery" offers a crucial framework for knowledge how the legacy of slavery keeps to form black identity formation in current contexts (Hartman 2008, 6). Hartman's paintings emphasizes the transgenerational trauma and

its effect at the processes of identity creation, a topic that is relevant to the narratives explored in this study.

By drawing on those interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks, the evaluation of black hybrid identity in Dessa Rose and *A Mercy* can be enriched and elevated. Bhabha's conceptualization of hybridity as a '1/3 area' resonates deeply with the enjoy of African Americans, whose identity formation is located between competing cultural influences and the continual shadow of slavery. Foucault's insights into energy, discourse, and the construction of subjectivity provide important analytical gear for unpacking the complex mental and social dynamics at play in those narratives.

Moreover, the engagement with the reviews and diversifications supplied by using African American scholars, which includes Camp and Hartman, ensures that the analysis stays attuned to the unique cultural, ancient, and gendered nuances of the black experience. This multilayered theoretical method permits for a extra nuanced and comprehensive knowledge of the ways wherein hybrid identities are constructed, negotiated, and expressed in the contexts of slavery and its aftermath.

The intersection of Bhabha's principle of hybridity and Foucault's conceptualization of energy-expertise relations creates a efficient analytical framework for exploring the complexities of black identity formation in Dessa Rose and *A Mercy*. By thinking about the approaches wherein the characters navigate the 'third area' of cultural hybridity and withstand the disciplinary energy systems that searching for to define and confine them, the evaluation can shed mild on the strategies of survival, resistance, and self-statement employed by African Americans.

Furthermore, the incorporation of perspectives from African American studies pupils, which include Camp's work on the gendered dimensions of hybridity and Hartman's insights at the 'afterlife of slavery,' guarantees that the analysis stays grounded within the unique historical, cultural, and social contexts which have formed the black enjoy. This multifaceted theoretical method enables a more nuanced and contextually-conscious exploration of the tactics of black hybrid identification creation portrayed in those seminal works of African American literature.

In summary, the evaluation of black hybrid identity in Dessa Rose and *A Mercy* is underpinned by means of the complementary theoretical frameworks of Homi Bhabha's hybridity and Michel Foucault's energy-discourse evaluation, in addition enriched with the aid of the vital perspectives presented by using students of African American studies. This interdisciplinary technique offers the necessary equipment to unpack the complexities of identity formation within the contexts of slavery and its lasting impact, in the long run contributing to a deeper understanding of the African American experience.

Scholars have extensively analyzed Dessa Rose for its portrayal of black hybrid identification and resistance. Hortense Spillers highlights how the radical "dramatizes the technique by means of which the 'Negro' is made," emphasizing the artificial and oppressive nature of racial classifications (Spillers 1987). Barbara Christian argues that Williams affords resistance as both physical and psychological, underscoring the significance of mental and emotional resilience (Christian 1993). Deborah McDowell notes that Williams's narrative

strategies permit her to "recover the unwritten, unrecorded history of slave girls," imparting a nuanced exploration of African American girls's studies (McDowell 1989).

A Mercy has been praised for its nuanced portrayal of hybrid identification in colonial America. Valerie Smith discusses how Morrison's characters struggle with the psychological results of displacement and dispossession, reflecting the broader historic context of slavery and colonization (Smith 2012). Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory" is relevant to the radical's exploration of intergenerational trauma and the transmission of cultural memory (Hirsch 2012). Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic* offers a framework for understanding the transnational and intercultural exchanges that fashioned early African diasporic identities (Gilroy 1993).

The literature on black hybrid identification in African American and slavery narratives is rich and various, drawing on numerous theoretical frameworks and historic contexts. Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, Michel Foucault's ideas on power and discourse, and black feminist idea offer valuable insights into the complexities of identity formation under oppressive structures. The historic context of slavery and the position of cultural reminiscence and storytelling are essential for understanding how black hybrid identities are preserved and transmitted. Scholarly contributions to the evaluation of *Dessa Rose* and *A Mercy* spotlight the nuanced portrayals of resistance, agency, and the intergenerational transmission of cultural memory in those narratives. This literature evaluation presents a comprehensive basis for similarly exploring the topics of black hybrid identity in African American literature.

3. Discussion

The institution of slavery and the pervasive racism of antebellum America profoundly shape Dessa's sense of self throughout the novel. Williams portrays Dessa's identity as a site of constant negotiation and struggle, reflecting the complex psychological impact of enslavement on African Americans.

Dessa's experiences under slavery, particularly the trauma of losing her partner Kaine and her unborn child, fundamentally alter her self-perception. The dehumanizing effects of slavery are evident in Dessa's initial inability to see herself as fully human, a condition that Saidiya Hartman describes as the "afterlife of slavery" (Hartman 2008, 6). This internalized oppression is particularly apparent in Dessa's interactions with Adam Nehemiah, where she must navigate the power dynamics inherent in the slave-master relationship.

The novel also explores how the racist ideologies underpinning slavery impact Dessa's sense of self. As Patricia Hill Collins argues, "Controlling images" of black womanhood, such as the "Jezebel" or the "Mammy," were used to justify the oppression of enslaved women (Collins 2000, 72). Williams depicts Dessa's struggle against these stereotypes, showing how she must constantly assert her humanity in the face of a system that seeks to deny it.

However, Williams additionally portrays Dessa's resilience and her capacity to keep a middle experience of self in spite of those oppressive forces. This resilience is often linked to Dessa's memories of her circle of relatives and network, which function a supply of power and

identification. As Hortense Spillers notes, this emphasis on kinship and community is a not unusual feature in African American literature, serving as a "effective force for survival" (Spillers 1987, 80).

Dessa's identification is further complex with the aid of her function between her African historical past and her American context. This warfare exemplifies what W.E.B. Du Bois famously termed "double recognition," the sense of continually looking at oneself thru the eyes of others (Du Bois 1903, 3).

Williams portrays Dessa's connection to her African heritage primarily through her memories and the cultural practices she maintains. The songs and stories Dessa remembers from her mother serve as a link to her African roots and a source of comfort and resistance. This representation aligns with what Henry Louis Gates Jr. calls the "signifying" tradition in African American culture, where inherited cultural forms are adapted and repurposed as a means of preserving identity and resisting oppression (Gates 1988, xxiii).

At the same time, Dessa must navigate the realities of her American context, including the legal and social structures that define her as property rather than a person. This navigation often requires a form of cultural hybridity, as Dessa adapts to survive within the American system while maintaining her sense of self. As Homi Bhabha argues, this hybridity can be a source of both tension and creative resistance (Bhabha 1994, 2).

Williams's portrayal of Dessa's hybrid identity challenges simplistic notions of cultural authenticity or purity. Instead, it presents identity formation as a dynamic process of negotiation and adaptation. This aligns with Stuart Hall's conception of cultural identity as "a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'" (Hall 1994, 225), emphasizing the ongoing nature of identity formation in the face of historical and social pressures.

Sherley Anne Williams's main female character, Dessa and the character of Rufel (Ruth Elizabeth) portray power struggle and color prejudice in the pre-Civil War America. When their relationships are seen through Foucauldian framework, it is possible to observe how power relations function in the framework of the racially oppressive system of slavery.

Concerning the relations between power and knowledge, Michel Foucault, who stressed the idea of power as relations of power rather than relations of forces, can be helpful in understanding the interrelations of Dessa and Rufel. To use Foucault's understanding depicted in *The History of Sexuality*, where he explains that power is relations that are in operation from points that may not be equal and are always in motion (94). From this perspective, one gets a better understanding of how power struggle began to unfold between the enslaved woman and the plantation mistress.

First, one might assume that it aligns with the classic slave-master top canonical power, where Rufel has the rights and privileges over Dessa. Still, Williams does it in a way that puts the two of them in a position where more conventional power relations are turned on their head. Thus, Rufel's solitude on the decrepit plantation and her reliance on Dessa and the other runaways allow for more power shift, negotiation.

This shifting of power corresponds with the conventional Foucauldian idea of power as something which not only inhibits but also creates knowledge and relations. The existing and the

changing dynamic of the complex interaction between Dessa and Rufel creates new meaning and constructs of race and ethnicity for both of the characters. As Cynthia Hamilton rightly observes, such encounters create a space where people's definitions of race are arrived at other than in the slave mold that is black and white (Hamilton 1996, 135).

These aspects of their interaction can be analyzed with the help of Foucault's biopower, power over populations through discursive and institutional intervention. They point out that the racialized frameworks of slavery are a sort of biopower, which sort people according to administratively convenient racial divisions. Through proving the existent of Dessa and Rufel's relationship, it can be suggested that such classifications are constructed and there is an existence of resistance.

Williams used the representation of this relationship also as the example of Foucault's point that resistance is always built into power relation. A form of resistance Dessa is able to assert in the narrative is her power to demand her humanity and force Rufel to consider her as fully human gradually changing their power dynamic as well as individual development.

Thus, the changes in the relations of Dessa and Rufel in the novel *Dessa Rose* is an effective literary technique to reveal the fluidity of the identity and the creation of cross racial solidarity in context of an oppressive society. What starts as anger intolerance between the two characters becomes an interesting symbiotic relationship, which in turn brings out changes in the essence of their attributes, specifically their character, and their perspectives of race.

At the start of the passage, Dessa and Rufel only perceive each other in terms of the stereotype of black/white relations and the gender roles typical for the slave culture. Dessa sees Rufel as the embodiment of the terrible white men, and Rufel, as far as he is concerned, Dessa is just a piece of property he may use when he wants and a threat as well. This initial dynamic reflects what Toni Morrison describes as the "dehumanizing effect of slavery on both the enslaved and the enslaver" (Morrison 2008, 38).

As circumstances force them into closer proximity and cooperation, their perceptions of each other begin to shift. This transformation aligns with Homi Bhabha's concept of the "third space," a site of cultural hybridity where fixed notions of identity are challenged and renegotiated (Bhabha 1994, 56). The abandoned plantation becomes this "third space," allowing for interactions that would be impossible within the normal strictures of antebellum society.

The evolution of their relationship has a profound impact on both characters' identities. For Dessa, her interactions with Rufel allow her to assert her humanity and individuality in ways that were previously denied to her. This process reflects what bell hooks terms "talking back," the act of moving from object to subject (hooks 1990, 9). Through her conversations and confrontations with Rufel, Dessa reclaims her voice and agency.

Rufel's identity undergoes an equally significant transformation. Her experiences with Dessa and the other fugitive slaves challenge her previously held beliefs about race and her own position within the slave system. This transformation exemplifies what Ruth Frankenberg calls

the "social construction of whiteness," revealing how racial identities are shaped by social interactions and power structures (Frankenberg 1993, 13).

The impact of their evolving relationship on their identities is not without conflict and ambiguity. Williams portrays their growing understanding as fragile and often fraught with misunderstandings and setbacks. This complexity reflects what Paul Gilroy describes as the "changing same" of black Atlantic cultures, where identity is constantly negotiated and renegotiated in the face of historical trauma and ongoing oppression (Gilroy 1993, 101).

Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* offers a nuanced and multifaceted portrayal of resistance and agency within the context of slavery. The novel explores various forms of resistance, from overt acts of rebellion to more subtle assertions of humanity and self-determination. This portrayal aligns with what James C. Scott terms "hidden transcripts," the covert discourse of subordinate groups that challenges dominant power structures (Scott 1990, 4).

At the most overt level, the novel depicts physical resistance through Dessa's participation in the slave uprising that opens the narrative. This act of rebellion represents what Herbert Aptheker describes as the "militant tradition" in African American history, challenging the myth of slave docility (Aptheker 1983, 162). However, Williams does not romanticize this form of resistance, portraying its brutal consequences and the psychological toll it takes on Dessa.

The novel also explores more subtle forms of resistance, particularly through Dessa's refusal to be defined by the dehumanizing narratives imposed upon her. Her ability to maintain her sense of self in the face of Adam Nehemiah's attempts to categorize and control her narrative represents what Hortense Spillers calls "interior regions," spaces of psychic resistance that slavery could not penetrate (Spillers 1987, 79). This form of resistance aligns with Saidiya Hartman's concept of "redress," the attempt to reclaim humanity within the constraints of slavery (Hartman 2008, 77).

Williams's portrayal of resistance extends beyond individual acts to encompass collective forms of agency. The community formed by Dessa and the other fugitive slaves on Rufel's plantation represents what Édouard Glissant terms a "counter-plantation," a space of cultural resistance and regeneration (Glissant 1989, 59). This communal resistance is evident in the preservation of African cultural practices, storytelling, and the formation of chosen families, all of which serve to counter the atomizing effects of slavery.

The novel also explores the complex relationship between resistance and complicity, particularly through Dessa's evolving relationship with Rufel. Their cooperation in the fake slave-selling scheme represents a form of what Robin D.G. Kelley calls "infrapolitics," everyday forms of resistance that operate within and against oppressive systems (Kelley 1994, 8). This portrayal challenges simplistic notions of resistance and collaboration, highlighting the complex strategies employed by enslaved individuals to navigate the slave system.

Williams's depiction of agency is equally nuanced, recognizing the severe constraints placed on enslaved individuals while also emphasizing their capacity for self-determination. Dessa's journey from enslavement to freedom is not portrayed as a simple liberation narrative,

but as a complex process of self-discovery and negotiation. This aligns with Frederick Douglass's assertion that freedom is not merely the absence of slavery, but an ongoing process of self-realization and empowerment (Douglass 1995, 126).

In *Dessa Rose*, Sherley Anne Williams portrays Dessa's acts of rebellion and self-assertion as intricate expressions of her hybrid identity, reflecting the complex interplay between her African heritage and her experiences as an enslaved woman in America. These acts of resistance serve not only as challenges to the oppressive system of slavery but also as manifestations of Dessa's evolving sense of self within the context of her dual cultural inheritance.

Dessa's participation in the slave uprising at the novel's outset represents a pivotal moment in her assertion of agency. This act of overt rebellion can be interpreted through the lens of what Paul Gilroy terms the "black Atlantic," a conceptual framework that emphasizes the transcultural and hybrid nature of African diasporic identities (Gilroy 1993, 15). Dessa's rebellion draws strength from both African traditions of resistance and the immediate context of American slavery, embodying what Stuart Hall describes as the "diaspora experience... defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity" (Hall 1994, 235).

Williams further explores Dessa's hybrid identity through her interactions with Adam Nehemiah. Dessa's refusal to conform to Nehemiah's narrative expectations and her strategic use of silence and misdirection represent what Homi Bhabha calls "sly civility," a form of resistance that operates within and against colonial discourse (Bhabha 1994, 93). This subtle form of rebellion allows Dessa to maintain her sense of self while navigating the dangerous terrain of her captivity, illustrating the complex strategies of survival and resistance developed by enslaved individuals.

The novel also depicts Dessa's self-assertion through her relationships with other characters, particularly Rufel. As their relationship evolves, Dessa's ability to challenge Rufel's assumptions and assert her own humanity represents what Mae G. Henderson terms "speaking in tongues," the articulation of a multi-voiced discourse that reflects the complexity of black women's subjectivity (Henderson 1989, 124). This multivocality allows Dessa to express different aspects of her identity in different contexts, highlighting the fluidity and adaptability of her hybrid self.

Williams's portrayal of Dessa's acts of rebellion and self-assertion aligns with what Edouard Glissant calls "creolization," a process of cultural mixing and reinvention that characterizes diasporic experiences (Glissant 1997, 142). Dessa's ability to draw on various cultural resources in her acts of resistance reflects this creolization process, demonstrating how hybrid identities can serve as sources of strength and resilience in the face of oppression.

In *Dessa Rose*, Sherley Anne Williams emphasizes the crucial role of storytelling and oral tradition in preserving and transmitting black identity within the context of slavery. Through Dessa's narrative and the broader community of enslaved individuals, Williams illustrates how

these oral practices serve as powerful tools for maintaining cultural continuity, resisting erasure, and asserting agency in the face of systemic oppression.

The novel's structure itself, with its emphasis on multiple narrators and the centrality of Dessa's own voice in the final section, reflects what Henry Louis Gates Jr. terms "signifying," a practice of narrative revision and reinterpretation central to African American literary traditions (Gates 1988, 44). This storytelling structure not only challenges dominant historical narratives but also embodies the collective nature of black oral traditions, where individual stories contribute to a larger communal narrative of resistance and survival.

Williams portrays Dessa's memories of her mother's stories and songs as crucial links to her African heritage, illustrating what Toni Morrison describes as "rememory," the process of reconnecting with ancestral knowledge and experiences through storytelling (Morrison 1995, 36). These remembered stories serve as a form of what Pierre Nora calls "sites of memory," spaces where cultural identity is preserved and transmitted in the absence of formal historical records (Nora 1989, 7).

The novel also explores how storytelling functions as a form of resistance against the dehumanizing effects of slavery. Dessa's ability to maintain her own narrative in the face of Adam Nehemiah's attempts to co-opt her story aligns with what Saidiya Hartman terms "counter-memory," the preservation of alternative histories that challenge dominant narratives of slavery (Hartman 2008, 77). This act of narrative resistance allows Dessa to assert her humanity and agency, even within the confines of her captivity.

Williams further emphasizes the communal aspect of storytelling through the interactions between Dessa and the other fugitive slaves. Their shared stories and songs create what Benedict Anderson calls an "imagined community," fostering a sense of collective identity and solidarity in the face of oppression (Anderson 2006, 6). This communal storytelling serves as a form of what James C. Scott terms "hidden transcripts," covert discourses that challenge dominant power structures and preserve alternative forms of knowledge (Scott 1990, 4).

The novel's exploration of oral tradition also highlights its role in preserving practical knowledge and strategies for survival. The information shared among enslaved individuals about escape routes, safe houses, and methods of resistance illustrates what Molefi Kete Asante calls "Afrocentricity," an epistemological framework that centers African and African American ways of knowing and being (Asante 1998, 2). This preservation of practical knowledge through oral tradition serves as a crucial form of resistance against the systemic attempts to deny enslaved individuals access to information and education.

A Mercy by Toni Morrison

In *A Mercy*, Toni Morrison explores the profound impact of maternal abandonment on Florens' evolving sense of self, illustrating how this traumatic experience shapes her identity and relationships. The novel portrays Florens' struggle to understand and come to terms with her mother's decision to give her away, a pivotal event that haunts her throughout the narrative.

Morrison's depiction of Florens' psychological state aligns with what psychoanalyst Melanie Klein terms the "depressive position," where the child grapples with ambivalent feelings

towards the mother figure (Klein 1935, 262). Florens' inability to fully comprehend her mother's motivations leads to a deep-seated sense of unworthiness and a desperate need for love and acceptance. This psychological framework provides insight into Florens' complex emotional landscape and her often self-destructive behaviors.

The impact of maternal abandonment on Florens' sense of self is further elucidated through the lens of attachment theory, as developed by John Bowlby. Bowlby argues that early attachment experiences significantly influence an individual's ability to form secure relationships later in life (Bowlby 1969, 330). Florens' insecure attachment, resulting from her perceived abandonment, manifests in her intense and often desperate attempts to secure love and belonging, particularly in her relationship with the blacksmith.

Morrison's narrative technique, which includes Florens' first-person account interspersed with her mother's perspective, underscores the complexity of the abandonment experience. This dual narrative structure aligns with what Marianne Hirsch terms "postmemory," the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before (Hirsch 2012, 5). Through this lens, Florens' struggle with her identity can be understood as not only personal but also as part of a larger historical trauma of slavery and forced separation.

The novel also explores how Florens' sense of abandonment intersects with her racial identity. As Hortense Spillers argues, the systematic destruction of African American kinship structures under slavery created a legacy of "ungendering" and "unmothering" that continues to impact black identity formation (Spillers 1987, 68). Florens' struggle to understand her place in the world and her worth as a black woman is deeply intertwined with this historical context of disrupted familial bonds.

Morrison's portrayal of Florens' internal dialogue and her attempts to fill the void left by her mother's absence reflects what bell hooks describes as the "yearning" central to black women's experiences of self-actualization in the face of oppression (hooks 1989, 15). This yearning drives Florens' quest for love and belonging, shaping her interactions with other characters and her understanding of her own identity.

In *A Mercy*, Toni Morrison presents Florens' navigation between African, European, and Native American cultures as a complex process of identity formation, reflecting the hybrid nature of early American colonial society. Florens' experiences embody what cultural theorist Stuart Hall describes as the "diaspora experience," defined by "hybridity, diversity, and difference" rather than by fixed cultural essences (Hall 1996, 235).

Florens' African heritage, though distant and fragmented, forms a crucial part of her identity. Morrison depicts this connection through Florens' memories and inherited cultural practices, aligning with what Pierre Nora terms "sites of memory" – spaces where cultural identity is preserved and transmitted in the absence of lived experience (Nora 1989, 7). The novel explores how these African cultural remnants interact with and are transformed by Florens' experiences in the colonial context.

The European influence on Florens' identity is primarily mediated through her relationship with the Vaark household and her literacy. Morrison's portrayal of Florens' acquisition of reading and writing skills reflects what Henry Louis Gates Jr. calls the "trope of the Talking Book" in African American literature, where literacy becomes a means of self-definition and resistance (Gates 1988, 127). This European-derived literacy interacts complexly with Florens' African heritage, creating a hybrid form of self-expression.

Florens' interactions with Native American culture, primarily through her relationship with Lina, add another layer to her hybrid identity. This cultural exchange exemplifies what Mary Louise Pratt terms the "contact zone," where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power (Pratt 1992, 34). Morrison explores how Florens absorbs and reinterprets Native American cultural elements, contributing to her unique cultural positioning.

The novel's depiction of Florens' navigation between these cultural influences aligns with Homi Bhabha's concept of the "third space," a liminal area of cultural production where fixed notions of identity are challenged and renegotiated (Bhabha 1994, 56). Florens' struggle to find her place within and between these cultural spheres reflects the broader processes of cultural hybridity that characterized early American society.

Morrison's portrayal of Florens' hybrid identity also engages with what Paul Gilroy terms the "Black Atlantic," a conceptual framework that emphasizes the transcultural and transnational nature of black identity formation (Gilroy 1993, 15). Through Florens' experiences, Morrison illustrates how African diasporic identities are shaped by complex interactions between African, European, and indigenous American cultural elements.

The novel's exploration of Florens' cultural navigation contributes to a broader understanding of the formation of American identity. As Werner Sollors argues, American culture is fundamentally characterized by processes of ethnic mixing and cultural hybridization (Sollors 1986, 288). Florens' journey thus becomes a microcosm of the larger American experience of cultural negotiation and identity formation.

In *A Mercy*, Toni Morrison presents Lina's adaptation to European culture as a complex process of identity negotiation, illustrating the formation of a hybrid identity in the context of colonial America. Lina, a Native American woman who survives the decimation of her tribe, embodies what Mary Louise Pratt terms "transculturation," the process by which subordinated groups select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant culture (Pratt 1992, 6).

Morrison portrays Lina's hybridity through her strategic adoption of European practices while maintaining elements of her Native American heritage. This cultural navigation aligns with what Homi Bhabha describes as "mimicry," a survival strategy that involves the partial adoption of colonial culture while maintaining a degree of difference (Bhabha 1994, 86). Lina's selective engagement with European customs, such as her participation in Christian rituals while maintaining her own spiritual beliefs, exemplifies this complex negotiation.

The novel explores how Lina's hybrid identity serves both as a means of survival and as a form of resistance. Her ability to move between cultural frameworks allows her to navigate the

colonial world while preserving aspects of her indigenous identity. This cultural flexibility reflects what Gerald Vizenor terms "survivance," a concept that emphasizes active Native presence and the continuation of indigenous traditions in the face of colonial domination (Vizenor 1999, 1).

Lina's adaptation to European culture also involves a process of cultural translation, as described by Walter Dignolo. This translation is not merely linguistic but involves the interpretation and renegotiation of cultural concepts and practices (Dignolo 2000, 3). Morrison shows how Lina reinterprets European religious and social norms through the lens of her Native American worldview, creating a unique syncretic understanding.

The novel's portrayal of Lina's hybrid identity challenges essentialist notions of cultural authenticity. As James Clifford argues, cultural identities in colonial contexts are often characterized by "routes" rather than "roots," emphasizing processes of movement, interaction, and change over fixed origins (Clifford 1997, 3). Lina's evolving identity exemplifies this dynamic understanding of culture.

Toni Morrison's portrayal of Jacob and Rebekka Vaark in *A Mercy* offers a nuanced exploration of how European identities evolve and hybridize in the context of the New World. Their experiences reflect what Alexis de Tocqueville observed as the transformation of European settlers in America, where old world identities are reshaped by the realities of the new continent (Tocqueville 1831, 26).

Jacob's character arc illustrates the complex process of identity reformation in the colonial context. His journey from a poor European orphan to a New World landowner embodies what Frederick Jackson Turner termed the "frontier thesis," which posits that the American frontier experience was fundamental in shaping American character and institutions (Turner 1893, 1). Morrison explores how Jacob's identity is transformed through his encounters with the land, indigenous peoples, and the institution of slavery.

The novel depicts Jacob's evolving identity as a form of what Homi Bhabha calls "hybridity," a process that gives rise to something different, new, and unrecognizable (Bhabha 1994, 111). This is evident in Jacob's gradual adoption of New World attitudes and practices, including his participation in the slave economy, which marks a significant departure from his initial moral stance.

Rebekka's character development similarly illustrates the process of identity transformation in the colonial context. Her journey from a marginalized existence in England to her role as a plantation mistress in America reflects what Linda Colley describes as the reconfiguration of British identities in colonial settings (Colley 1992, 324). Morrison explores how Rebekka's sense of self is challenged and reshaped by her experiences in the New World, particularly through her interactions with Lina and the other women on the farm.

The relationship between Jacob and Rebekka serves as a microcosm for exploring broader themes of cultural adaptation and hybridity. Their marriage, which crosses class lines, and their joint venture in the New World exemplify what Édouard Glissant terms "creolization,"

a process of cultural mixing and reinvention that characterizes colonial and postcolonial societies (Glissant 1989, 89).

Morrison's portrayal of Jacob and Rebekka's evolving identities also engages with questions of power and privilege in the colonial context. As Edward Said argues, colonial identities are shaped by complex relationships of domination and subordination (Said 1994, 9). The novel explores how Jacob and Rebekka's European heritage positions them within colonial power structures, even as their identities are transformed by their New World experiences.

In *A Mercy*, Toni Morrison provides a nuanced exploration of how race, gender, and class intersect to shape the hybrid identities of her characters in colonial America. This intersectional approach aligns with Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, which posits that various forms of social stratification, such as race, gender, and class, do not exist separately from each other but are interwoven (Crenshaw 1991, 1241).

Morrison's portrayal of Florens exemplifies how these intersecting factors influence identity formation. As a young, enslaved black woman, Florens' identity is shaped by the complex interplay of racial oppression, gender expectations, and class constraints. This multifaceted identity construction reflects what Patricia Hill Collins terms the "matrix of domination," where systems of oppression are interlocked and mutually reinforcing (Collins 2000, 18).

The novel explores how racial categories in colonial America were fluid and in the process of formation, aligning with Ira Berlin's concept of "Atlantic creoles" - people of African descent who navigated between African, Native American, and European cultures (Berlin 1998, 17). Morrison illustrates how characters like Florens and Sorrow embody this cultural fluidity, their identities shaped by their racial background but not solely defined by it.

Gender plays a crucial role in the formation of hybrid identities in *A Mercy*. Morrison's portrayal of female characters such as Lina, Rebekka, and Sorrow demonstrates how gender intersects with race and class to create unique experiences of marginalization and agency. This exploration aligns with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, which posits that gender is not a fixed identity but is produced through repeated social performances (Butler 1990, 25).

Class dynamics in the novel are portrayed as both a divisive force and a potential site for cross-cultural alliances. Morrison's depiction of the relationships between characters of different social standings, such as Jacob and his workers, reflects what E.P. Thompson describes as the formation of class consciousness through shared experiences and struggles (Thompson 1963, 9).

The novel's treatment of these intersecting factors in identity formation contributes to what Stuart Hall terms "new ethnicities," a concept that emphasizes the fluid, contextual nature of racial and cultural identities (Hall 1994, 441). Morrison shows how characters navigate and renegotiate their identities in response to changing social, economic, and cultural circumstances.

Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* offers a profound exploration of the impact of colonialism on black cultural identities in early America. The novel illuminates the complex processes of cultural loss, preservation, and transformation that characterized the African diasporic experience in the New World.

Morrison's portrayal of the formation of black identities in colonial America aligns with what Paul Gilroy terms the "Black Atlantic," a conceptual framework that emphasizes the transnational and intercultural exchanges that shaped African diasporic cultures (Gilroy 1993, 15). The novel depicts how characters like Florens navigate a cultural landscape marked by the forced displacement of African peoples and the erasure of their cultural heritage.

The impact of colonialism on black cultural identities is explored through the theme of cultural memory and its transmission. Morrison's depiction of the fragmented memories and cultural practices retained by enslaved characters reflects what Pierre Nora calls "lieux de mémoire" or sites of memory, where cultural identity is preserved in the absence of lived environments (Nora 1989, 7). This concept is particularly relevant to the African American experience, where the rupture of slavery necessitated new forms of cultural preservation and transmission.

The novel also engages with the concept of "double consciousness" as articulated by W.E.B. Du Bois, illustrating how black characters navigate between their African heritage and the dominant European culture (Du Bois 1903, 2). Morrison shows how this duality can be both a source of conflict and a wellspring of creativity and resilience.

Morrison's exploration of the impact of colonialism on black cultural identities contributes to what Homi Bhabha terms the "third space," a concept that emphasizes the productive potential of cultural hybridity (Bhabha 1994, 56). The novel depicts how new forms of black cultural expression emerge from the collision of African, European, and Native American influences.

The novel's treatment of language and literacy as sites of colonial power and resistance aligns with Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's analysis of the role of language in colonial domination and decolonization (Thiong'o 1986, 16). Morrison explores how characters like Florens use literacy as a tool for self-expression and resistance, even as it represents a form of cultural assimilation.

A Mercy also engages with what Orlando Patterson terms "social death," the process by which slavery sought to sever the cultural and social ties of enslaved Africans (Patterson 1982, 38). Morrison illustrates how characters resist this social death through the maintenance of cultural practices and the formation of new communal bonds.

4. Conclusion

The analysis of black hybrid identity in *Dessa Rose* and *A Mercy* highlights the complex portrayals of black hybrid identity within the context of slavery and its aftermath. Both novels demonstrate how the formation of identity for enslaved individuals is profoundly influenced by the intersection of African heritage, American context, and the dehumanizing effects of slavery.

In *Dessa Rose*, the protagonist's identity emerges as a site of constant negotiation and resistance. Dessa's struggle to maintain her sense of self in the face of oppression exemplifies what Homi Bhabha terms the "third space" of cultural hybridity (Bhabha 1994, 56). Her

relationship with Rufel, the white plantation mistress, serves as a microcosm for exploring the fluidity of racial categories and the potential for cross-racial understanding.

A Mercy explores the nascent stages of African American identity formation in colonial America. Through characters like Florens, Morrison illustrates what Ira Berlin describes as the "charter generations" of African Americans, whose identities were shaped by the fluidity of early colonial society and the not-yet-solidified racial categories (Berlin 1998, 29). This portrayal aligns with Paul Gilroy's concept of the "Black Atlantic," emphasizing the transnational and intercultural exchanges that shaped early African diasporic identities (Gilroy 1993, 15).

Both novels highlight the role of memory and storytelling in preserving cultural identity and resisting erasure. This emphasis on narrative as a form of resistance aligns with what Henry Louis Gates Jr. describes as the "signifying" tradition in African American literature (Gates 1988, xxiii). The texts also explore the gendered dimensions of slavery and identity formation, contributing to what Hazel Carby terms the "reconstruction of womanhood" in African American literary tradition (Carby 1987, 6).

The exploration of black hybrid identity in *Dessa Rose* and *A Mercy* has significant implications for our understanding of identity formation in African American and postcolonial literature. These novels demonstrate that hybrid identity is not a fixed state but a dynamic process of negotiation and adaptation in response to historical and social pressures.

This conceptualization of hybrid identity aligns with Stuart Hall's assertion that cultural identity is "a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being'" (Hall 1990, 225). The characters in both novels embody this process of becoming, constantly renegotiating their identities in response to changing circumstances and power dynamics.

The novels also highlight the importance of considering the specific historical contexts in which hybrid identities are formed. Morrison's portrayal of 17th-century America and Williams's depiction of the antebellum South demonstrate how racial categories and power structures evolve over time, shaping the possibilities for identity formation in different ways.

Furthermore, both texts emphasize the role of agency and resistance in the formation of hybrid identities. This focus challenges simplistic notions of cultural hybridity as mere mixture or synthesis, instead presenting it as a potentially subversive force. As Homi Bhabha argues, hybridity can function as a form of resistance to colonial power, creating spaces for new forms of cultural meaning and identity (Bhabha 1994, 159).

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