



Women in Toni Morrison's Novel *A Mercy*: An Analysis of Subaltern Voices in the American Melting Pot

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Abstract

Discovery of the Americas by Iberian powers began the colonization of farm lands, which brought the Westward progress of civilizations. European hegemonial discourse depicted the 'West (master) and the Others (subjugated)'. The subaltern studies suggest the reinventing of commoners' history, away from terms of occidental explanations and its biases.

Counter to the argument of World System theorists, who believe in the domination of Eurocentrism and its knowledge episteme, (Enlightenment), subjugated knowledge(s) dwelled on exteriors as de-colonial logic. The article intended to elaborate that multiple knowledge systems i.e., common sensual (doxas) and systematic knowledge [episteme(s)], came in contact within an environment named Gnosis by Latin American subaltern historian Walter Mignolo, leading to the geopolitics of knowledge. Seventeenth century America(s) was a transcultural, tri-continental space, where different world views and local histories collided. Though, the difference of defining the European dominance and power was a reality; in America(s) multiple schools of thought i.e., episteme(s) collided; co-habituated, co-existed and translated one another retaining their respective percepts, beliefs and, knowledge systems; though each transformed after the cultural contact.

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The paper employing Mignolo concepts of episteme, doxa, and gnosis and Foucault concept of subjugated knowledge(s) aims to revisit the interplay of power/knowledge in Toni Morris textual landscape “Mercy”, where a Male Master exploits four Women (European, Indigenous American, African, Mulatto) when he embraces the responsibility of these Women in name of Mercy. The masters’ home becomes a tri-continental space, a space for Border Gnosis, where women recognizing their differences develop a bond of co-dependency, though translating one another’s acts according to their respective percepts.

Key Words: Cultural Translation, Doxa, Border Gnosis, Subaltern Studies, Walter Mignolo, Toni Morrison, Americas

Introduction

The study is an attempt to understand the concepts of Episteme, Doxa, Gnosis, and border thinking as narrated by Latin American, Subaltern Historian Walter Mignolo, by going through the depiction of four women characters (European, Native American, African slave girl and Mulatto) of Toni Morrison’s short novel *A Mercy*.¹ The concept of Border Thinking is about the geopolitics of knowledge and recognition of different epistemes representing different civilizations coming in contact in space of the Americas during the post-Columbian era. Border thinking is an acknowledgment of difference from the perspective of subsumed people of Americas and Africa who were incorporated in World System. Their knowledge systems were ranked as inferior because, in the 17th century, Spanish missionaries judged and ranked human intelligence and civilization by whether “people are in possession of alphabetic writing or not”.² In this manner, the dominant episteme tried to absorb the difference and translate “other” in European syntax.

With the emergence of Subaltern History, an effort is made to resituate the difference. Subaltern Knowledge is insight on the margins of the world system and involved in action politics to resituate knowledge claims of different civilizations. According to Dipesh Chakrabarty, it is an effort to decenter the core or “Provincialize Europe”, which was a local minor tradition with global ambitions. Chakrabarty is of the view that there are many Europes, real/fanaticized, historical and lived in everyday experience

¹ Toni Morrison, *A Mercy* (London: Vintage Books, 2008).

² Walter D. Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America* (Oxford UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2005).

of colonized across the globe, that was not only created by the colonizer but also made by colonized.³ Europe with its knowledge claims, concepts, and categories has become a myth that shaped cognition, making it unimaginable to question it. To Mignolo no living being at this point in time is immune to coloniality, as Europe with its claims of the universality of knowledge and human destiny has tricked its 'others' in an inferior position in the power matrix.⁴ Subaltern as defined by Ranjit Guha literally means inferior in rank. To understand the geopolitics of knowledge that made Europe, its culture and economy global by means of coloniality (a term coined by Anibal Quijano), and the potential of de-colonial project as envisaged by Walter Mignolo, an overview of knowledge from the perspective of the subaltern is apt.

Literature review

Walter Mignolo is of the view that for healing the wounds and shrinking the local tradition of Europe, i.e., modernity with global ambitions, epistemological decolonization, or de-coloniality is needed, as the basis of "other" rationality or plural reasons that question the legitimacy of universality claims of European episteme. The project of de-coloniality will start with the understanding of one's place in the colonial matrix.⁵ Mignolo was not perhaps the first thinker to think about episteme(s) of those who are inferior in rank or subaltern. Ranjit Guha initiated the project of Subaltern Studies inspired by Antonio Gramsci six-points project outlined in his notes on Italian history. The aim of the project was to understand the conditions and culture of subalternity with attitudes, ideologies, and belief systems; the culture that shaped the disciplines of history, politics, economics, and sociology. To Guha subordination is a relation that cannot be understood except its constitutive 'other' in binary, i.e., the dominance. The objective of subaltern historiography was not only to free the disciplines from imperial grids but also elite historiographical discourses of nationalism, to acknowledge the contribution of people on their own, independent of the elite.⁶

³ Depesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Post Colonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁴ Walter D. Mignolo, *The Politics of Decolonial Investigations* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2021).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ranjit Guha, "On Some Aspects of Historiography", in *Subaltern Studies*, Vol. I, *Writing on South Asian History and Society* (New Delhi: Oxford, 2005), 1-9.

Inspired by Guha's path-breaking project on subaltern studies, a group of scholars from Latin America founded the same discipline in Latin America(s); after the end of the cold war and displacement of revolutionary alternative; the continents that first experienced colonization.⁷ As the states in America(s) were created in pluralistic societies with different national, linguistic, ethnic groups of Europe; these states were also diverse in racial makeup comprised of Indigenous, African and European people. With a multitude of binaries and hierarchies of domination and subordination subaltern studies in America(s) were distinct in character. Walter D. Mignolo⁸ is of the view that social scientists from 16th to 19th century like Hegel, Karl Marx, and Toynbee placed Latin America(s) in hierarchical world order from a European perspective and in relation to Europe. Though these thinkers acknowledged a world and people out there outside Europe, these people and places were objects of understanding for sake of intervention. The non-European categories were either absent as subjects or included as subjects whose perspective does not count.

In the founding statements of Latin American Subaltern studies, it was declared that the objective of Subaltern studies in America(s) was reaching the historiography in reverse. Subaltern by definition not registered as a historical subject capable of hegemonic action, but it was present in structural dichotomies, and hierarchies.⁹ Dipesh Chakrabarty¹⁰ is of the view that Europe has become a myth with historicist ideas of a linear predetermined course of history, where the rest of the world is looking their future. History is an activity of living, narrowing the gap between the world and words. The legacy of Europe is everywhere, even in concepts and ideas like uneven development, class struggle, resistance etc. Europe has been made universal through historicist ideas, leaving no place for plural reasoning. Europe has emerged as a singularity, an uncontested universal historical category. Foucault is of the view that any historical category that becomes transcendental in relation to fields of events must be

⁷ Patricia Seed, "How Ranjit Guha Came to Latin American Subaltern Studies", *Dispositio* 25, No. 52 (2005): 107-11.

⁸ Walter D. Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America*.

⁹ Latin American Subaltern Studies Group, "Founding Statement", *Boundary 2*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (1993): 110-21. Available at jstor.org/stable/pdf/303344.pdf.

¹⁰ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*.

problematized by traversing back to the time of emergence of the singularity.¹¹

Mignolo traces the origins of the present 'conceptual and institutional universe' when Christian theology and secular liberal ideas of modernity were transplanted to a new world. Coloniality operated by establishing itself as a civilization project and with silencing disavowing, racializing the other civilizations.¹² Coloniality, the geopolitics of knowledge, and dominant ideology at play can be gazed in writing of African American women novelists like Toni Morrison revealing a socio-historical understanding of colonialism. Toni Morrison's works substantiate that decolonialism and resistance remained recessed by dominant knowledge/power; yet difference, different logic and plural reasoning were always present developing on margins, as common sensual knowledge or exterior of knowledge imposed by European church and state institutions. The critical reading gives an insight into the continuity of colonial relations of domination and oppression, and the dual colonization of women. The works of Morrison establish the continuity of colonial experience in present as well.¹³

The textual landscape of *A Mercy* provides a caricature of a home, of a space that becomes tri-continental in the seventeenth century with the coming of European migrants, and African slaves. The indigenous people are relegated to the status of subaltern, and plural reasoning rooted in different epistemic values comes in contact. *A Mercy* according to Morten Hansen establishes a relation between two times, i.e., the time in which the novel takes place and the time in which it is written. Questions of race and Gender, white supremacy, and patriarchy are relevant to this day. Morrison laid bare the claims of freedom by casting gaze on an invisible presence that is the presence of unfree living in heart of the apostle of economic and political liberty.¹⁴ Morrison in view of Dominguez brought together representatives of all major racial categories in contact in the new

¹¹ Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).

¹² Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges and Border Thinking* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000).

¹³ Liliane do Espirito Santo, *A Postcolonial Focus on the Margins: Discussing Gender and Identity in the Literature of Women from the Americas*, MA Thesis (University of Iceland, 2018). Visit at <https://skemman.is/bitstream/1946/30084/1/Liliane.Santo.MA.Thesis.pdf>.

¹⁴ Morten Hansen, "I Am Become Wilderness: Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* and Global American Space, *Literature Interpretation Theory* 29, No.3 (2018): 210-27.

world America(s), i.e. Native American, African, Anglo, and Mulatto. All these women are locked in their own cognition. Though their status was different in hierarchy yet all of them were slaves in different manners. Cognoscenti are of the opinion that the plot is complex and nonlinear narrating the same events from different perspectives and voices. Characters coming from different backdrops have their own respective opinions. The four female characters though share the experience of women beings in a given moment, yet their interpretation of events can be contextualized in lived experiences of their respective cultural episteme(s).¹⁵

The four women characters of the novel belonging to dominant and subjugated groups are involved in act of cultural translation as described by Robert J. C. Young. He is of the view that colonialism is the transformation of indigenous culture into a subordinated culture of a colonial regime and superimposition of colonial apparatus into which all aspects of subordinated indigenous culture is restructured, yet certain aspects of indigenous cultures remain untranslatable. The translation is the mode of intercultural communication involving power relations and domination. Young is of the view that the process of translation is not taking place in a neutral space and it is violence carried on local language, culture and people to attain mastery and control, but it is not a one-way process. Subjugated culture and knowledge also translate the dominant imposter and knowledge takes the form of resistance. The colonizer has to rely on translation to understand everything about the land and people they conquered; at the same time, the colonized translate the acts of imperialists according to their own cultural idioms.¹⁶ Translation becomes the strategy of survival for repressed people and subaltern knowledge. To Mignolo, the decolonial project needs a clear way of intercultural communication, conceptual apparatus and a visionary utopia for decolonial epistemic reconstitution.¹⁷

¹⁵ Jorge I. Domínguez, "Book Review", in *The Cambridge History of the Native Peoples of the Americas: South America*, Vol. 3 (November 2000): 765-844; Yakiv Bystrov and Natalia Telegina, "Polyphony of Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*: The Fugal Form", *Neopilologus* 104, No.2 (2020): 283-300.

¹⁶ Robert J. C. Young, *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

¹⁷ Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2011).

Problem statement

For five hundred years Europe is building it as a civilizational project and in-process undermined other civilizations. It transformed all spheres of lived experience for humans as well as non-humans, imposing universal meaning while silencing, demeaning and racializing other forms of rationality. Europe has emerged as a singularity, the only reason left with no alternative. Geopolitics of knowledge was central to the colonial project of universalism, coloniality and globality. The linear determinist approach of historiography produced a normalizing effect for coloniality. The Colonial matrix of power cannot be gazed from the outside as we are all inside it.

As an ensemble of causes was responsible for the creation of discursive (concepts, themes, rhetoric) and non-discursive environment; resulting in a singular impact of Europe centrality and dominance of European knowledge. We must go back in time to the point of emergence of the singularity and extricate the web of relations of power, strategies, techniques and procedures to understand the subjectivity as well as resistance. Decolonial project of subaltern knowledge alternatives, new history or in Foucauldian terms genealogy, start with problematizing the fixed essence and underlying laws of development; and with recognition of the role of subaltern, how it altered, modified life strategies, learning and understanding and kept alive alternative reasoning alive on the margins. In a way, it is reverse historiography in search of time and space when present categories, singularities, knowledge claims were not accepted as normal and contested by "other" rationalities.

Rationale of study

The paper revolves around the following research questions and supposition of study

- How European knowledge created a regime of truth universally and marginalized the "other" knowledge(s) and episteme(s) in the geopolitics of knowledge?
- After five centuries of colonial civilizational project, European reason, knowledge, belief systems and episteme have become a dominating singular truth, and which are wantedly or unwantedly have to follow by the natives other than Europeans. Do subaltern knowledge(s), truth claims and de-colonial narrations have capacity to alter modernity, the culture of Europe?

The supposition of this study is that though in power matrix subaltern knowledge(s) are ranked as inferior yet these alternative episteme(s) and reasoning managed to survive and evolved on margins as exterior to dominant episteme.

Methodology

The paper aims to revisit the politics of knowledge at play in America(s) after two hundred years of Columbian discovery when the Eurocentric order was in process of emerging as the singularity. The modern states of America(s) had not instated, though America(s) had developed relations of domination/subordination with Europe and Africa. At this particular moment of history, when colonization was in process and European metropole was establishing its hegemony; America(s) was a tri-continental space where de-territorialized subjects/people from Europe and Africa entered in master-slave relations and the indigenous population was also de-territorialized, displaced, silenced and disavowed. All these racial categories have their respective perceptive and epistemological knowledge with different ontological views. It was definitely a time and space where European concepts and categories were detested by inferiors in rank, i.e. the subalterns. The interplay of episteme, the geopolitics of knowledge and dialectics of plural reasoning can be gazed from outside in Toni Morrison work.

The study is based on discourse/content analysis of Toni Morrison's brief novel *A Mercy*. Its textual landscape is a caricature of lived experiences in America(s) from different cultural and racial standpoints. The dialectics is going on between different prioris, epistemes, doxas, structuring the cognition of de-territorialized European, Indigenous and African subjects in the Seventeenth Century. Morrison gave voices to percepts and thinking of female voices that are otherwise silenced despite their dominant: subjugated ranks in the matrix of power; the women who are dependent on each other for their survival. Discourse Analysis of *A Mercy* helps us to traverse back to point of inception of the European dominance and creation of European regime of truth. The alternatives true discourses are there to detest European reasoning. Characters ambivalently accepting European hegemonic knowledge are in the struggle of keeping (a)live their respective episteme(s).

Geopolitics of knowledge and global designs of European local history

The question of epistemology came to the fore with the emergence of the World System, as different cosmologies collided in space of the Americas. Walter Mignolo is of the view that America is not a two-sided struggle between Anglo and Native Americans. These were world views collided in the Sixteenth century and the process is continued till day. Neither world view remained the same afterward. Mignolo takes the geopolitics of conflict in the World System to another level.¹⁸ World System appeared with a diachronic conflict: Conflict between empires in the world system having the same episteme as well as between world views taking the form of border thinking. This geopolitics of conflict is between the modern enlightened knowledge of core and knowledge struggling to survive on the margins of the world system.¹⁹

As Mignolo is studying the conflict between different epistemes (knowledge systems in the tri-continental space of Americas, he has broadened the concept of episteme as conceived by Michel Foucault. He added two more concepts in the Foucauldian conceptual toolkit to understand the history of knowledge, i.e. Doxa, Gnosis/ Border Thinking. Drawing inspiration from Greek philosophy of knowledge Mignolo appends the concept of episteme as employed by Foucault as priori that shape reason and knowledge. To Mignolo episteme can be understood both as science and intellectual configuration about systematic knowledge. Doxa is common sensual knowledge based on percepts. It is a knowledge kind that is exterior to episteme as it is not considered as appropriate knowledge as it is unable to develop itself systematically. In an environment of plural reasoning and hegemonic designs of one ontological view doxa become important due to its decolonial potential and capacity to challenge the absolute claims of the hegemonic knowledge system. Here Mignolo introduces the concept of Gnosis, an environment that becomes the condition of possibility for knowledge at the core, i.e. episteme, and other reasonings that evolve as exterior to the core, i.e. doxa. Hence gnosis contains multiple strains of border thinking. Border thinking to Mignolo is a consequence of the modern world system. The Modern colonial world is built on geo-body politics of knowing and gendered, patriarchal and racial

¹⁸ Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*, 17.

¹⁹ Ravi Kumar and Rafida Nawaz, "The Rise and Fall of Power in Eurocentric World System: A Study of Iberian Rise and Decline", *International Journal of Social Science and Economic Research*, (March 2017): 2621-37.

classification of bodies and regions. Border Thinking in response to universal absolute knowledge claims acknowledges the local, subjugated, subsumed “I” in the power matrix of knowledge. Subaltern reasoning finds its place to detest absolutism, universalism and imperialism by placing emphasis on (para)doxic slogan “I AM-WHERE I THINK”.²⁰

Mignolo has borrowed the concept of ‘episteme’ from Michel Foucault but he extended the concept in the American context. While Foucault who believed on singular episteme, divided human history in three phases i.e. Classic, Renaissance and Enlightenment; Foucault’s idea of episteme is Eurocentric in nature as he ignores the possibility of multiple episteme(s) coexisting and coming in context with each other.²¹ Mignolo considers *gnosis* as border thinking of the conflicting intersection of different episteme(s). He casts a system of production of knowledge from inside and outside the borders of modern world systems. Border thinking is the epistemological view where imaginary consensus about universal absolutism cracks. It provides the possibility of re-articulation of subaltern knowledge(s).²²

Discussion

Gnosis gives a view of the world with plural reasoning and a space where different and differences come in contact, conflicting with each other yet co-existing in an environment of co-dependency. Owing to Michel Foucault’s notion of insurrection of the subjugated knowledge, border thinking could serve as mediation between the interrelated issues. Translation becomes a tool to absorb the colonial differences. Mignolo is witting on the history of knowledge in the tri-continental space of America(s) that was conceived as the daughter of Europe and its promised future. Asian and African civilizations were attributed as pasts of humanity. The trio of civilizations came together in space of Americas bringing in contact with different epistemes.

²⁰ Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*, 18; Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality and Colonization* (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1995), x-xi.

²¹ J. G. Merquior, *Foucault* (London: Fontana Press, 1985).

²² Walter D. Mignolo, *The Politics of Decolonial Investigations*, 35.

Resistance of subaltern knowledge in tri-continental space of Americas

Mignolo takes by subjugated knowledge the historical constructs that have been buried and disguised fundamentalism of formal systemization. These knowledges have been disqualified as inadequate. Europe entered America as a master with a right to impose its episteme. The space of America, its habitat, its socio-cultural ecology was *Gnosis* where African, European and indigenous American civilizations collided and each transformed in the process but still the respective epistemes retained their unique cultural coloring and right to translate the 'Other'. Though it remained the epistemic privilege of Europe to narrate its history and project it as a universal category, in Toni Morrison's novel *Mercy* a European master home is created as a space for border thinking, where multiple doxa(s), the common sensual views evolve on exteriors. It is a home where woman from three different cultural backgrounds (European, Indigenous American and African) came in contact with each other. The fourth woman a Mulatto by origin named Sorrow is though exploited only share her sorrows with her imaginary twin. The narration of these women, reflecting on same event represents the epistemic coloring of their belief system.

The discussion revolves around the translation of "other" through the lens of doxa and commonsense. The character's percepts about self/other are highlighted through their respective position in power/knowledge matrix, i.e. I Am-Where I Think.

- a. Displaced in Her own Land: Lina, the Orphan with Tradition
- b. Embracing Patriarchy: Rebekka European Mistress yet Subaltern
- c. The Slave Girl embracing Patriarchal Slavery for Freedom
- d. Placing Himself as European in Power Matrix: Master's Reflections

Displaced in Her own land: Lina, the orphan with tradition

The indigenous American woman Lina, who was a survivor along with two other kids when her village was burned and wiped away; casts reflection on European cruelty, "European could calmly cut mothers down, blast old man in the face with muskets louder than moose calls, but were average if a not-European looked Europe in the eye".²³ European cruelty according to Lina was not limited to humans but to trees, birds and other living creatures who fell victims of European greed, that according to Lina was

²³ Toni Morrison, *A Mercy* (London: Vintage Books, 2008), 44.

behaving like a greedy orphan. Lina lamented the death of fifty trees who were killed for building a home; “killing trees in that number without asking their permission would stirrup malfortune”.²⁴

In contrast to that Europeans perception of indigenous Americans were depicted as they admired native women who they think worked as hard as they themselves but scorned native man who simply fished and hunted like gentry, though, impoverished gentry that owned nothing.

European imposition of their belief system on indigenous Americans was narrated by Morrison in the manner:

They named her Messalina. Lina acknowledged her status as heathen and let her be purified by these worthies. She learned that bathing naked in the river was a sin; that plucking cherries from a tree burdened her with theft; that to eat corn with mush with one’s fingers was perverse; that god hated idleness most of all so staring off into space to weep for mother or playmate was to count damnation; covering oneself in the skin of beast offended god, so they burned her deerskin dress and gave her a good duffel cloth.²⁵

According Mignolo and Catherine, like colonialism, decoloniality has its own “*history, herstory and praxis*”. It was integral to local struggles expressed in minor acts of refusal and resistance to patterns of power established by the colonialists.²⁶ The acts involve redefinition and re-signifying life “in condition of dignity”. The re-existence is insurgence not only opening venues but at the same time undoing the “linearity and singularity of the west”.²⁷ Lina resistance takes the form of re-existence when she denies the hegemonic modes to retain her unique identity, though her episteme was transformed in her master’s home.

²⁴ Ibid, 42.

²⁵ Ibid, 40.

²⁶ Walter D. Mignolo & Cathrine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality Concepts: Analytics Praxis* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2018), 16.

²⁷ Ibid, 3.

Relying on memory and her own resources she cobbled together neglected rites, merged European medicine with native scriptures with lore and recalled or invented the hidden meaning of the things; found in other words a way to be in the world. She moved into the natural world. She cawed with birds, chattered with plants, spoke to squirrels, sang to cows and opens her mouth to rain. The shame of having survived the destruction of her families shrank with her vow never to betray or abandon anyone she cherishes.²⁸

It was the death of the world for Lina but with help of common sensual knowledge *Doxa*, on the exterior of dominant episteme backed by Christian church and state and in a space of border thinking where multiple self-existed it was the rebirth of a new self and resistance through de-colonial logic.

Embracing patriarchy: Rebekka European mistress yet subaltern

Mignolo is of the view that coloniality created modern, capitalist, hetero-patriarchal matrices of power and promoted a particular way of thinking, knowing, analyzing and feeling. It was a system of social classification based on the idea of racial binary of conquerors and conquered. The strategies of domination included control of labor and subjectivities and practices of genocide and enslavement.²⁹ The system was not a simple dichotomous classification of colonizer/ colonized but had a gendered dimension as well. The European Women were part of hegemonic race yet being women shared some common everyday experiences with subaltern. Though the cognition of racial superiority shaped their acts yet they had to find refuge and solace with other subaltern women, i.e. indigenous, Africans in times of crisis and need. Though the hegemonic/subaltern belief systems were incommensurable in many respects yet there was a demarcated territory of consensus as well provided by the gnosis.

The other female character is the master's wife Rebekka who reached America as a result of marriage. "Already sixteen she knew her father would ship her off to anyone who would book her passage, and relieve him

²⁸ Morrison, *A Mercy*, 46.

²⁹ Mignolo & Walsh, *On Decoloniality Concepts*, 16.

of feeding her”.³⁰ Alternative prospects of life available to her were either a servant or a prostitute. Though married life in an unseen land will lead to separation from her mother yet it was also an escape from male sibling’s dismissive attitude towards sister, but it was also an escape from the nude clutches of any men “drunken or robber”.³¹

The exposure to other belief systems made Europeans to critically evaluate Europe itself. Rebekka evokes her memory to recall her displacement from his homeland that was going through a religious civil war. Kidnapping was so common in the city of her birth that the fear about strange unseen worlds faded in her cognition.³² To save herself from the “threatening world out there”³³, she accepts the salvation provided by Jacob as a husband. After marriage, “time became simply running sea, unmarked eternal and of no matter”³⁴, “she loved her voracious appetite and the pride he took in her cooking.”³⁵ Though women were subjected to men, church laws set limits, “wife-beating was common but with restrictions – not after nine at night, with cause and not anger”³⁶ Rebekka was content with her life to the extent that she pities Lina, for not being experienced a man.

The only loss she mourns about in rest of her life was the separation from her mother as she wished to see her aged, “grey, stooped, wrinkled? would the sharp paled eyes still radiate shrewdness, or age and illness had softened her to benign, toothless malice.”³⁷ During times when she enjoyed the plenty of life necessities like the food, she recalled her siblings who used to live a life full of starvation. America whatever the danger was not worse than Europe for her. It was a timeless space for her as time became simply eternal where a past did not haunt not a future beckon.

The only friend she knew in the vast wilderness was Lina, both women spend time preserving hunted meat, making pickles, caring life stock but despite all the companionship Rebekka feared Lena’s recitation in a strange language and her dialogue with things other than humans. When Rabekka’s

³⁰ Morrison, *A Mercy*, 72.

³¹ *Ibid*, 76.

³² *Ibid*, 75.

³³ *Ibid*, 86.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 83.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 94.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 93.

³⁷ *Ibid*.

kids died after living few months, she considered Lina's strange religion responsible for the death of children. Belief systems of both women are representative of border gnosis where dominant and subjugated knowledges collided.

The slave girl embracing patriarchal slavery for freedom

To Mignolo Border Thinking is "multiplication of epistemic energies in diverse local histories". Space of America(s) brought in contact diverse local traditions especially indigenous and African. In process of re-existence, subaltern perspectives were also re-articulated, mapping not only colonial differences but also commonalities and epistemic potential of subaltern standpoints i.e. I Am-Where I Think.³⁸ The bond between slave girl Florens and Lina is created due to standpoint and lived experience of subaltern. Though the hegemonic belief system was imposed on her by the Church yet she admires the choices of re-existence opted by Lina.

The slave girl Florens was exchanged for debt by Master from a Spanish slave trader. Her mother she recalls as "Minhe Mae" abandons her as she requests master Jacob to take her as debt bounty because she doesn't want to abandon her boy. Floren's self-image was constructed by "other", i.e., the European church and masters. Repeated church discourses developed her cognition about religion, as she tells herself that "we are baptized and can have happiness when this life is done".³⁹

Mistress's perception of Floren is that not only she is trustworthy "she was deeply grateful for every shred of affection, any pat on the head, any smile of approval"⁴⁰, as she being a girl was abandoned by her mother. It creates a bond of womanhood between the Mistress and Slave girl though she is unwilling to own her in place of her deceased female child who passed a few days before Florens was taken by Master. But the real mother-daughter bond was created between Lina and Florens who relates with her as 'she was a quiet, timid version of herself at time of her own displacement before destruction". She competed with the Mistress for the love and affection of Patrician (The Master daughter from Rebekka who died at a tender age) but this one "could be would be her own".⁴¹

³⁸ Mignolo, *The Politics of Decolonial Investigation*, 45.

³⁹ Morrison, *A Mercy*, 2-3.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 59.

⁴¹ Ibid.

Florens views about Lina reflect the bond of subaltern status in comparison to the Europeans, who according to her is named praying savage by neighbors; “she is once churchgoing yet she bathes herself every day and Christians never do. She wears bright blue beads and dances in secret at first light when the moon is small”.⁴² Florens attraction towards Blacksmith also reflects the bond between subalterns. Floren was attracted as he was “too shiny, way too tall, both arrogant and skilled” and also a free man like master. Lina at the moment resists like a mother and becomes a wall.⁴³

When Mistress fell seriously ill after Master’s death Florens was sent to bring Blacksmith back as he knows some traditional medicine to cure illness. Florens goes in search of a blacksmith with a letter from Mistress that the slave girl belonged to her and nobody else can enslave her. The letter becomes a license of freedom for the slave girl saving her from hostile clutches. During her travel adventure, she comes across a white orthodox Christian family that becomes skeptical about a free-moving young black girl. She goes through the body search and narrates the experience of being treated as subhuman species like this “I walk alone except for the eyes that join me on my journey. Eyes that do not recognize me, eyes that examine me for a tail...wondering eyes that stare and decide ...if my knees bend backward like the forelegs of a dog. They want to see if my tongue is split like a snake”.⁴⁴ The experience of humiliation gives her aspiration to redefine and re-signify life in conditions of dignity and self-determination and gives her courage to confront the bio-politics of control, domination and commodification and she chooses to accept patriarchal slavery to free herself from slave status.

Placing himself as European in power matrix: Master’s reflections

The power matrix of I Am-Where I Think defines the binary between hegemonic and subaltern, and ‘I’ according to Mignolo becomes a “relational way of seeing people, subjects, struggles, knowledge(s) and thoughts”.⁴⁵ Jacob Vaark, the Master of *A Mercy* categorizes himself as “misborn and disowned” who migrated to a new world due to prevailing religious intolerance in the Spanish Kingdom. In the European social matrix, he was a subaltern but was in an advantageous position in the new

⁴² Ibid, 3.

⁴³ Ibid, 58.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 112-13.

⁴⁵ Walter D. Mignolo & Cathrine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality Concepts*, 17.

homeland being a member of white race. He became landowner of a farmland in Barbados. He felt a pulse for orphans and strays. A hierarchical order distinguished gentry from commoners but "only things, not bloodlines or character separated them".⁴⁶

Jacob was dismissive of the stubborn arrogant attitude of white gentry. The representative of that class was d'Ortega owner of tobacco and sugarcane cultivation with a fleet of free labor. When Ortega offers him, slaves, to settle a debt he refused to deal in flesh. Master Jacob preferred that male black slaves away from home where four women from different cultural backgrounds were living together as a "frequently absent master was an invitation and temptation to escape, rape and rob".⁴⁷

At his death, the loss is not only felt by his wife but all the four females to shroud or mourn "as three unmastered women and an infant out here alone, belonging to no one become a wild game for everyone"⁴⁸ European Master Jacob learned much from indigenous women Lina like the art of farming and domesticating animals. As Jacob had an ambivalent relation with the people of his own race and was critical of religious orthodoxy, he created an island for himself and his wife Rebekka along with three abandoned girls. The act seems unreasonable to Lina coming from indigenous tradition and she translates it as pride as her existence requires some encircling protection like tribe, family, or church. "Pride alone made them think that they needed only themselves, could shape life like Adam and Eve like gods of nowhere beholden to nothing except their own creation".⁴⁹

Master Jacob was the only link of his wife Rebekka to the new World. He told her the "stories of a place where time itself was baby"⁵⁰ but as he grew in wealth and prestige the stories were replaced by "less practical even whimsical" gifts.⁵¹ The Jacob was her sole protection from outside threatening world and on his death, she learnt the menace of familiar objects even her own self. Looking in the mirror she was horrified by her

⁴⁶ Ibid, 25.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 32.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 56.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 57.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 60.

⁵¹ Ibid, 90.

image and sought forgiveness. Rebekka relation with Jacob was a mutually loving relation and “she became like children when the man is gone”⁵²

Master Jacob’s act of taking slave girl Florens in return for a high price. Rebekka doubted that Master never makes a deal at loss and benefits even from his Mercy. Master takes Florens as he wants to console her wife who has suffering from the death of her only long-surviving girl child Patricia, but the act is considered by Rebekka as a satire that a Black girl is going to come as a replacement of her biological kid. Lina removes her doubts about Master when her mother clarifies that she asked Jacob to take her as she wanted to save the young girl from the sexual exploitation she faced at hands of Ortega.

A Mercy is not only the geopolitics of knowledge but perceptions. Translation becomes a medium of perceiving other acts as well as means of coexistence.

Conclusion

Border thinking/Gnosis is the notion that is beyond hermeneutics and epistemology. It describes the reality from both sides of the border. It takes accounts of cracks and fishers that originate conflicts and describes reality from both sides of the epistemological divide. Toni Morrison’s Mercy is a narration of conflict between local histories: one representing a forward movement and a global design with an intention to impose itself upon other local histories and knowledge’s that are compelled to accommodate to themselves to transform reality. The tri-continental space of America is replicated on a small scale in master’s home where three different episteme(s) colliding in the personification of three women and their relation with the master who becomes a source of their survival and they establish psychological dependency in this personified male figure who is also a signifier of Europe.

The three-belief systems yet accommodating one another translates the other according to one’s own percept. Yet their survival depended on each other but they are critical of personal beliefs and life patterns, their belief system has also gone through the process of change influenced by their exterior and coexistence with other epistemes. Toni Morrison is of the view

⁵² Ibid, 94, 96.

that the exterior world is important in shaping our belief system. "We never shape the world. The world shapes us".⁵³ In the hierarchical world, subjectivity is shaped by position in the power matrix. Mignolo's belief "I Am-Where I Think" makes the position and placement of the thinking subject important. Gnosis according to Mignolo is knowledge in general with the possibility of multiple episteme coexisting, colliding and transforming yet retaining their respective socio-cultural understandings. The geopolitics of knowledge shape characters' behavior towards each other.

After the death of Master Jacob, the Rebekka become skeptic of Lina's strange manners and religion and questions herself to whom she rely on? As she shares a religious bond with these African-Americans but her thinking represents her belief that "Native and Africans, for instance, had access to grace but not to heaven- a heaven they knew as intimately as they know their own gardens".⁵⁴ Translation also serves as a medium of co-existence and bond of co-dependency. The Master home was a replication of America(s) with a multitude of cultures, "where everyone had anything but no one had everything".⁵⁵ As a female thinks in terms of relation Lina develops bonding and affinity with Mistress Rebekka as her mother and Rebekka's kids were buried in the same land.

A Mercy provides a view of lived experiences at the point of emergence of singularity and inception of European knowledge claims as universal. It acknowledges the presence of plural reasoning and multiple episteme(s). Though all knowledge systems are not treated as equal and placed in a matrix of hegemonic: subaltern knowledge and dyadic relation of power and subjugation, but the acceptance of plural standpoints serve as decolonial logic for an alternative history of colonialism that according to Mignolo is still to write on cracks of modernity. Border thinking and subaltern knowledge serve as means of academic decolonization.

⁵³ Ibid, 69.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 97.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 58.