



# Black Commodification and Creative Survival in Toni Morrison's *Love and A Mercy*

*Komodifikasi Hitam dan Kelangsungan Hidup Kreatif dalam Love and A Mercy karya Toni Morrison*

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## ABSTRAK

Makalah ini mengkaji dimensi penindasan dan strategi yang diadopsi oleh karakter untuk bertahan dan mengatasi sistem sosial-ekonomi yang menantang dan tidak adil yang sengaja dirancang untuk membuat mereka terus-menerus tidak berdaya, tergantung dan dikebiri dalam Toni Morrison's *Love* (2003) dan *A Mercy* (2008). Ia berpendapat bahwa dinamika kekuasaan, kuk perbudakan dan ketidakadilan rasial yang secara sistematis merendahkan orang kulit hitam semuanya memiliki titik konvergensi yang sama - komodifikasi historis orang Afrika-Amerika. Representasi kreatif dari masyarakat predator seperti itu memiliki makna yang sangat besar dalam jalan dan strategi yang diambil oleh karakter untuk mencapai mobilitas ke atas, kemandirian ekonomi dan relevansi sosial. Makalah ini menerapkan wawasan dari psikoanalisis, Marxisme, dan Historisisme Baru dalam menganalisis novel-novel dalam upaya bergulat dengan teks-teks sejarah, sosial dan lingkungan yang dimainkan serta tekstur masalah yang menyerang kemanusiaan orang kulit hitam di Amerika. Dari berbagai perspektif teoretis ini, makalah ini juga menggarisbawahi visi artistik dan humanistik penulis untuk memberikan pemahaman, kemauan, dan tekad kepada karakter kulit hitam untuk bertahan hidup dari masyarakat yang menindas dan membebaskan diri dari belenggunya.

**Kata Kunci:** Toni Morrison, komodifikasi, menindas, bertahan hidup, pemangsa.

## ABSTRACT

The paper examines the dimensions of oppression and the strategies adopted by the characters to survive and overcome a challenging and unjust socio-economic system deliberately designed to keep them perpetually disempowered, dependent and emasculated in Toni Morrison's *Love* (2003) and *A Mercy* (2008). It argues that power dynamics, the yoke of slavery and racial injustice that systematically denigrate the black man all have as a common point of convergence - the historical commodification of the African American. The creative representation of such a predatory society has immense significance in the avenues and strategies taken by the characters to achieve upward mobility, economic independence and social relevance. The paper applies insights from psychoanalysis, Marxism and New Historicism in analysing the novels in an attempt at grappling with the historical, social and environmental texts at play as well as the texture of the issues that assail the humanity of the black people in America. From this motley of theoretical perspectives, the paper also underscores the writer's artistic and humanistic vision of endowing the black characters the understanding, will and resolve to survive an oppressive society and liberate themselves from its shackles.

**Keywords:** Toni Morrison, commodification, oppressive, survival, predatory.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The pursuit of economic well-being has remained a relevant factor in the human phenomenon, vis-à-vis the African American experience of striving to attain upward social mobility (Akoda & Imbua 2005; Odey 2018). At various stages of their socio-historical and economic life, African Americans have risen phenomenally through decades of economic exploitation, political oppression and social injustice to economic emancipation, cultural assertion and political freedom (Eyang 2004; Yun 2008; Eyang 2016). Yet the same problems that they have distinctly struggled against continue to stare them in the face in what appears as the past's strong presence in the present.

With economic emancipation as a strategic determinant of their collective upward mobility, African American characters in Toni Morrison's novels are constantly entangled in a web of struggles to liberate themselves from poverty and lack. They mobilise themselves against a society that is systematically and deliberately designed to break their resolve, psychologically castrate and leave them permanently dependent and stagnated in a dystopic state of abjection.

The weaponization of poverty against African Americans by the oppressive system is meant to keep them psycho-socially denigrated and economically dispossessed. These dimensions of psychological and economic castration remain historical weapons deployed from the time of slavery as vividly captured in Morrison's novels on slavery. On this, Albert Camus (1957) notes about black slaves and the racially victimized in the early twentieth century

that they "...had all been victims because they were all poor" (p. 87). However, thematisation of poverty and the representation of modes of economic deprivations in Morrison's novels have both necessitated the depiction of characters who have sometimes resigned themselves to fate, thereby accepting the status-quo; and many others who work themselves through the crucibles of racial injustice to enviable heights of economic attainment in society. This theme is a leitmotif in many of her novels, including *Love, A Mercy* (2003), *Home* (2012) and *God Help the Child* (2015).

The socio-economic vicissitudes in which she situates her characters are not only evident in the imbalance of black poverty and white prosperity but also manifest in the deliberately determined way the characters triumphantly emerge from a hideous past of economic exploitation, psychological debasement and socio-political inferiorisation into a self-made future of economic prosperity, mental freedom, social emancipation, cultural cohesion and political integration. Delineating the black characters in this light has meant endowing them with unqualified resilience of spirit and determination to survive, a neat thematic chord that binds her narrative *oeuvre*.

However, the realities of the American experience are a historical constant, deliberately orchestrated by a white majority (Okpiliya & Eyang 2003; Eyang & Okune 2004). Black poverty and other forms of deprivations are a function of the economic nature of American capitalism. This is a reality that is largely necessitated and fuelled by economism – the notion that economic factors have prime importance over and above all others. Toni

Morrison's *A Mercy* (2003). is an example of such a system where there is commodification of the black race. And this racial commodification is driven principally by economic gains. The slave system was fuelled by the spirit of western economism. As an institution, slavery and later, racism was sustained to feed this establishment and ideology. It becomes even clearer as we read from Richard Barksdale and Kenneth Kinnamon (1972) that slavery: "... by its very nature as an economic institution largely denied blacks the opportunity and the occasion to create written literature" (p. 2). Slavery, a remarkable phenomenon in the creation of African American history and American life, sets the temperament for race relations in America revealing that blacks and whites were deliberately and circumstantially lurked in a tumultuous co-existence placing them in latent hate, unrelenting hostility and mutual suspicion.

In *Love*, most of the women are drawn to the Beach Front Hotel in search of jobs, while others are drawn to Bill Cossey for financial security. *A Mercy* (2008) is a novel about the horrendous poverty and indignities of the slave system. Here we read about the terrible effects of economic exploitation in which slavery reduces blacks to mere objects. The pitiable life and traumatic experiences of the protagonist, Florens, typify this harrowing reality.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The main theoretical basis of the analysis of the novels in this paper is psychoanalysis. However, insights are drawn eclectically from aspects of New Historicism and Marxism to deepen the

analysis and provide the ideological plank upon which to situate the black experience in the socio-cultural, historical and economic metamorphosis of America.

Psychoanalysis as a theoretical approach examines human experiences to account for their rational and irrational behaviour especially as they impact interpersonal relationships. The Freudian concept and process of the resolutions of a character's psychosis include an analysis of the dream life, slip of tongue, language, and overall emotional complex (Weiner 2013). The application of this theory to the analysis of literature is credited to Sigmund Freud. Habib (2008) notes that: "The application of psychoanalytic principles to the study of literature, however, is a relatively recent phenomenon, initiated primarily by Freud and, in other directions, by Alfred Alder and Carl Jung" (p. 83). Viewed by many as the science of the mind, psychoanalysis seeks to provide explanations on the reasons behind all human actions and how society or immediate and past environment(s) influence(s) subsequent human actions. It proposes that the dream world is a real-world because there are elements of realism or truth found in dreams. Dreams are the product of the unconscious and they make us explore that aspect of our mind which we have seemingly little control over.

Psychoanalysis also focuses on the interpretation of how the human mind works, creating a basis for the effective analysis of Morrison's characters. This is because the unconscious is responsible for the way we think, as well as the way we act and feel. It is the interaction between the conscious and the unconscious that contributes immensely to shaping human life and events and by extension the world.

Freud believed that his patients had suppressed incestuous desires which they unconsciously neglected. He observed that:

“The unconscious stores our hidden desires, ambitions, fears, passions, and expresses itself through dreams, slips of tongue, art, irrational behaviour and that... what it has most frequently suppressed all our lives is the sexual desire of our childhood” (Winner 1982, p. 42).

It is important to note that the concept of psychoanalysis which thrives on the notion of “the unconscious was not an entirely novel idea by Freud. Freud’s fundamental contribution, according to Habib (2008) was to “open up the entire realm of the unconscious to systematic study and to provide a language and terminology in which the operations of the unconscious could be expressed” (p. 83). Psychoanalysis becomes a radical departure from and a problematization of:

all the notions on which philosophy, theology and even literary criticism have conventionally rested. The ideal of self-knowledge, the ability to know others, the capacity to make moral judgments, the belief that we can act according to reason, that we can overcome our passion and instincts, the idea of moral and political agency, intentionality and the notion held for centuries that literary creation can be a rational process” (p. 83).

This hitherto absolutist notion became radically challenged by the viability of Freud’s postulations about the efficacious power of influence that the unconscious wields over the human mind and his actions. Habib (2008) captures this in succinct terms when he accepts that:

Freud postulated that we bear the form of “otherness” within ourselves; we cannot claim fully to comprehend even ourselves, why we act as we do, why we make certain moral and political decisions, why we harbour given religious dispositions and intellectual orientations (p. 83).

Based on the foregoing, a psychoanalytic reading of *Love*(2003) and *A Mercy* (2008) reveals that the forms and details of Morrison’s novels are mutually related to her attempt at capturing the distinct mental and emotional attributes of her characters. In other words, the structures of the texts under analysis can be analysed as deriving from the author’s attempt to penetrate the mindscape of the characters and even in representing her own impulses. This paper, therefore, establishes this mutuality by referring to Morrison’s personality as a clue to properly explain, interpret and establish meaning in the texts and also make reference to the texts to establish the personality and biography of Morrison. Psychoanalysis, therefore, reveals a mode of reading the novels as well as the subjectivity and consciousness of the novelist, Morrison.

The uniqueness and relevance of this theoretical praxis is embedded in its structural analysis. And these analyses are designed to explicate the levels of relationship between the conscious and the

unconscious. It is these categorizations and the explication of the mental structure and processes that lead Sigmund into designing the model of the mind as possessing three functional features, namely; the “id”, the “ego” and “superego”. The “id” incorporates libidinal and other desires. The “superego” is the internalization of social, morality, and prosperity. The “ego” tries its best to negotiate the conflicts between the insatiable demands of the “id”, the impossibly “stringent requirements of the superego” and the limited possibilities of gratification offered by reality” (Martin, 2011, p. 258).

On the other hand, the inclusion of New Historicism in the analysis of these novels derives from the relevance of history and historical discourses to the understanding of the different levels and periods of economic exploitation within African American history. In her historical throwback to slavery, Morrison in *A Mercy* (2008) just as in *Beloved* (2003) provides a detailed account of slave life in Seventeenth-Century America during the period of the colonies.

Therefore, New Historicism provides that the value of blacks, especially in America consists in the discovery of their origins, is sufficient explanation of their nature and existence and that the nature of African Americans is entirely comprehended in their historical development. This is understood under the searchlight of Lee and Beck's definition of historicism as:

... the view that the history of anything is a sufficient explanation of it, that the values of anything can be accounted for through the

discovery of its origins, that the origins of anything are entirely comprehended in its development (Barbosa da Silva 1982, p. 568).

This history is what throws up the complexities of race, class, and gender in telling the African American story (Imbua 2015; Eba & Imbua 2017). It is important to note also that the tropes of economic exploitation and survival are historical themes in African American literature, vis-à-vis Toni Morrison's narratives. They define the overwhelming modes of economic exploitation, the spirit of white economism and the commodification of blacks both as slaves and as “free” beings, the oppression and the derogatory representations of Africa Americans in the United States of America

M. H. Abrams (2014) defines New Historicism by stating that: “in place of dealing with a text in isolation from its historical context, New Historicists attend primarily to the historical and cultural conditions of its production, its meanings, its effects, and also its later critical interpretations and evaluations” (p. 190). This is a hint at the nature of the approach as it extends its limits beyond just history to pay attention to the several elements that intermingle to make up a text. Charles Bressler agrees with this definition when he states that:

New historicism asserts that there exists an intricate connection between an aesthetic object (a text or any work of art) and society while denying that a text can be evaluated in isolation from the cultural context. We must know, it declares the societal

concerns of the author, of the historical times, evidenced in the work and of other cultural elements exhibited in the text before we can devise a valid interpretation (p. 131).

This view proves instrumental as it guides the average critic into unearthing textual meaning through observation of the diverse elements that aid the interpretative process.

Marxism lends itself to the analysis of the economic structure of Morrison's America revealing that the evolving history of African Americans; of their outline, traditions, politics and social interaction; of their economic and cultural institutions and the overall perception of the socio-cultural climate is largely determined by the complexities and dynamics of material production, "that is, of its overall economic organization for producing and distributing material goods (Abrams, 2014, p. 155). Abrams further notes that:

"Changes in the fundamental mode of material production effect changes in the class structure of a society, establishing in each era dominant and subordinate classes that engage in a struggle for economic, political and social advantage" (Abrams, 2014, p 155).

Put differently, material acquisition and economic control determine a people's social and political class in society. The predominant class is the class that has economic power and control material possession. In each era of (African American) history, the subordinate African American class has striven through the

years for economic political and social relevance as well as cultural advantage.

Toni Morrison's historical novels, especially those set in the slavery period and the Civil Rights Movement such as *A Mercy* and *Love* portray recurrent themes of economic oppression where slave masters control material production, thereby entrenching themselves as economic powers over their subordinate slave labourers. Florens in *A Mercy* and other slaves are not only invisible in the economic stratification of the American society but are mere commodities to be traded; sold and bought, to the gross dehumanization of the black race (Dapena 2015). M. H Abrams also explains that:

"... Human consciousness is constituted by an ideology that is, the beliefs, values, and ways of thinking and feeling through which human beings perceive and by recourse to which they explain, what they take to be reality. An ideology is in complex ways the product of the position and interests of a particular class. In any historical era, the dominant ideology embodies and serves to legitimise and perpetuate, the interests of the dominant economic and social class" (Abrams, 2014, p 155).

### 3. Historical Perspectives on African American Economic Exploitation in Toni Morrison's Novels

Slavery as an institution was the engine-room of America's agricultural and industrial revolution. However, while it benefited the white bourgeois class, black themselves were socially and legally barred

from partaking in the proceeds of economic revival of the periods. The implication of history to the analysis of Toni Morrison's novels does not only lie in the settings of the texts, but in the clear interpretation, it provides for the reading of her themes of economic exploitation as well as the clarity they give to the analysis and description of present African American realities. It is therefore imperatively necessary to appropriately situate, analyse and underscore the shades of dispossessions, economic oppression and the myriad shades of black commodification as well as the creative methods of survival by African American characters in *Love* (2003) and *A Mercy* (2008). The commodification of the black characters and their eventual economic divestment can be situated within historical periods. This is largely because a retrospective overview of the gruelling thematic landscape of slavery and racism is crucial to unearthing latent metaphors of economic castration, as are implicated in African American history. Richard Barksdale and Kenneth Kinnamon (1972) have explained their relevance in *Black Writers of America*, by observing that: "... the circumstance of slavery is crucial to the understanding of early Afro-American literature in two ways. First, slavery had the negative effect of divesting Africans of a substantial portion of their own culture..." (p. 2). It is clear that not only were the slaves rid of their Africanity but also their humanity. This is true because a human life must be defined by its individuality, the ability to relate, interact, trade and even earn a living. But in this case, the slaves were only tools of economic exploitation in the hands of their masters, without the freedom to trade or

being traded with. They exerted their physical, mental and emotional energies toward the economic good of their masters; but in the end, they (slaves) were left poor and less than humans.

Toni Morrison implicates these aspects of cultural and economic dispossession of slaves and free blacks in her historical novels. There is hardly a Toni Morrison novel that does not capture the reality of a deliberate strategic economic suffocation of blacks by whites and the American society at large. The creative force with which history is re-lived endows the text a special significance; and is fundamentally a defining quality of the African American literary tradition, vis-à-vis Morrison's narratives. Her textual analysis of present African American economic problems also finds answers and even solutions in history. Her engagement with historical themes gives her narratives the retrospective quality that is peculiar to the African American literary tradition. In this same spirit of retrospection which is a salient technique for cultural interpretation in African American literature, Jennifer Holden – Holden-Kirwan (1998) refers to Morrison's comment on the relevance of history to the understanding of literature as well as the interpretation of culture, which to her has drawn more efforts to be disremembered rather than to be remembered.

Morrison's retelling of the African American economic story is a conscious step toward remembering that history. Hence, Morrison subscribes to history as a reliable strategy for exploring the African American divestment and abject poverty of black minorities in America. In Holder – Kirwan's views, Morrison acknowledges that:

“... the enslavement of Africans and African Americans in the United States is something that the characters don’t want to remember, I don’t want to remember, black people don’t want to remember” and that is because everyone would rather choose to disremember the fact of slavery because of its indignities and inhumanity by its practitioners (Holden-Kirwan 1998, p. 324).

The economic life of free blacks from the turn of the century up to the period of the Civil War presents a picture of deteriorating conditions for the masses of blacks and improving opportunities for a fortunate few who had certain personal privileges. However, these privileges were almost non-existent because during the entire period blacks were placed on the lowest paying, the least desirable and unskilled jobs such as: agriculture (farming in the plantations), common labour, personal service, maritime work, and domestic occupations. For the first three decades of the century – a period when the nation’s economy was appreciating and expanding, blacks could at least feel some assurance and some sense of security. This brief moment when they had a slight feeling of economic security was based on the fact that minimal jobs were open to them. Beginning in the 1930s however, black economic security began to wither because of the wave of competitive onslaught from migrant groups.

Frederick Douglas notes in his narrative that after escaping to New Bedford, trying to find a job, he describes his obstacles as: “such was the strength of prejudice against colour, among the white callers, that they refused to work with me, of course I would get no employment.” (Blight 1993, p. 85) Having been hampered by the constrictions in society, and deprived of such economic opportunities... but a much more typical aspect was the fact that the hod carriers or those who dug the canal, or washerwoman and cook were overworked, underpaid and then finally displaced by Irish competition.

Blacks were second-class citizens in the emerging free economy of a nation where the most exploited are the victims of their own colour. Blacks were not only made to go through these inhuman experiences but were also short-changed of their entitlements and earnings. Quite naturally and inevitably too, the literature that was created at this time by black people living in this gruelling circumstance was the literature of survival with the pulse of rage and protest. It was a kind of literature that became responsive in the most direct way to the very pressing problems of race and inequality. In terms of form and content, while the literature was more realistic in communicating the pain and agony of blacks, the characteristic forms which black literature during this period undertook were the oration, the public letter and the autobiography. The novel and drama had not become as popular. The fiction, as well as the drama of William Wells Brown, or even the poetry of Frances Watkins Harper or James Whitefield, also spoke clearly to and about the pressing and immediate economic problems of the black race in America. Literature, therefore, became a



viable medium of self-expression and an avenue to gain economic stability and voice.

#### 4. BLACK COMMODIFICATION AS STRATEGIC DEVOCALIZATION IN *A MERCY* (2008)

*A Mercy* (2008) is Morrison's portrayal of the images of shame and poverty during slavery. These images define family life for Florens in this period. In Jacob Vaark's House Florens, Lina and Sorrow sleep in Cowsheds even during winter. She sees this condition as being much better than sleeping in the kitchen floor with the family. According to her, sleeping in the cookhouse with them is not as nice as sleeping in a broken sleigh with Lina. In cold weather, we put planks around our part of the cowshed and wrap our arms together under pelts" (p. 7). Florens' experience typifies the dehumanization of slaves as they were seen as mere animals and commodities. It is for this reason that Florens becomes the ransom from Mr. Ortega for a bad debt owed Jacob Vaark. More pathetic and dehumanizing is the way she is packaged and transported to Vaark's house. She is strapped and placed with luggage and carried away in dehumanizing circumstances. She is bundled between boxes of books and food by Reverend Father and ferried across the river. She is made to go through the unbearable, hurtful and injurious cold along the tortuous journey. Will and Scully are also commodities of exchange for land under lease from Vaark. Florens tells of Will and Scully who according to her: "... never leave the night here because their master does not allow it. You remember them how they will not take orders from you until Sir

makes them (he could do that since they are exchanged for land under lease from Sir" (p. 7).

Apart from these forms of dehumanization, Mina Mae's trauma of weaning her daughter, Florens, to thrust her into the cold hands of slavery, which she likens to killing or burying her child alive, is equally emotionally gruesome. Slavery as a viable business venture was a more secure commodity to slaveholders than any other item of trade. If a slave trader had lost his business fortunes to economic or natural circumstances, he is at least left with one commodity-his slave. In this case, D'ortega loses all of his products; tobacco, gin, a third of his slaves and in the end the only thing he has left is more slaves, which is what he gives to Jacob Vaark in exchange for a bad debt he owed. The narrator observes the inhuman way in which Vaark examines the slaves and the spotted bug-ridden leaves of tobacco and concludes thus:

... it became clear what Ortega had left to offer. Slaves. Jacob refused. His farm was modest; his trade needed only himself. Besides having no place to put them there was nothing to occupy the 'Ridiculous' said Ortega. You sell them. Do you know the prices they garner? (Morrison 2008, p. 22).

The physical and psychological effects of slavery on its sufferers are numerous. Not only that the slaves were given marks for easy identification, but the scars that are left on their faces and bodies also become a constant painful reminder of their worthlessness and their being less than humans.

*A Mercy* (2008) becomes a creative but painful reminder of how much value

slaveholders place on horses and other beasts of burden than on black slaves. The horses are usually more fairly treated than black slaves. The psychological devastation and the traumatic effects of slavery on the lives of slaves themselves are ramified. When they are paraded by D'Ortega for Jacob Vaark to choose from, the slaves are shown as fearful, withdrawn, angered and even judgemental. We are told that:

The women's eyes looked shockproof, gazing beyond place and time as though they were not actually there. The men looked at the ground. Except every now and then, when possible, when they thought they were not being evaluated, Jacob could see their quick glances, sideways, wary but, most of all judging them (p. 25)

Toni Morrison's close intertextual representation of slavery provides troubling details about the economic benefits of slavery to its practitioners and the deprecating effects that attended its enterprise, especially on the black slave.

Senhor D'Ortega is indebted to Jacob Vaark, but finds it difficult to pay because of the loss he had incurred when a third of his slaves died of ship fever. He is fined five thousand pounds worth of tobacco for throwing their corpses close to the bay. "He is forced to remove the corpses with pikes and nets. He piled them up in two drays, cart them out to lowland where saltweed and alligators will finish the work" (p. 19), slaves were faced with natural and systemic conditions that had great psychological effects on them.

Lina's family and the entire village are said to be victims of the smallpox

epidemic. And since the disease had no known cure then, the tendency was that foxes and other wild animals began to feast on the dying and the dead. This was the plight of Lina's family. Whatever was left of the community after the ravaging cannibals were rounded up, shot and burnt down by gentries and other leaders of the church like Deacons. Lina is fortunate to survive both the epidemic and the onslaught but the devastating psychological impact deeply traumatises her as she withdraws into mental solitude. Lina watches on as her siblings and parents are devoured to their bones by wild animals. She watches on as the only place they call home is degraded and levelled into a hip of ashes and rubbles. More devastating to her is the gunning down of her mother who had contracted smallpox, to prevent the disease from spreading to other cities. This results in a devastating psychological effect of mental solitude and outright behavioural disorder that she even began to "caw wi the birds, chat with plants, speak with squirrels, sang to the cow and open her mouth to rain" (p. 57).

However, having gone through this horrific experience, and witnessing the pogrom in her village, she resolves never to betray a loved one. She overcomes the sickening years of her traumatic horror by consciously erasing from her memory these experiences that had become a part of her life. Morrison explains that this kind of intense solitude, deep regret, and unrestrained fury would have broken and shattered her life had she not consciously erased those turbulent six years that preceded the death of the world in which her parents and siblings lived.

## 5. SILENCING AND ECONOMIC OPPRESSION IN *LOVE*

*Love* opens with details about the moral and environmental stench that either seems to choke the life out of the Beachfronters or slows down economic activities around the shores. In this case, therefore, environmental factors have been observed as an important indicator for the growth or crunch of African American businesses. Here, the smell of dead fish had turned the resort into a joke of some sort.

The irreconcilable internal squabble of interest amongst the women who worked for Bill Cosey is heightened by the lack of trust among the workers. The author identifies a shift in interest and patronage as a major cause of the prevalent economic crunch as it was characteristic of the protest period. Although some attribute the subsequent disappearance of the beachfront economic beehive to the periodic stench, others attribute this loss to a change of focus from leisure and business to politics and protest. Morrison, through her character, May, believes that an excessive preoccupation with the ideals of protest and freedom accounts for this economic emptiness and the attendant high poverty levels within the Cossey Resort community. May says: "No. I don't care what he told people, something else wrecked his resort. Freedom..." (p. 8). However, May, a providential character, who is enmeshed in the clash of interests with the Cosey women, had proffered strategies to revamp the Resort. Bill Cosey had re-invested his interest in the political climate of his day, which May tells us that she is convinced that "civil rights destroyed her family and its business. By which she meant colored people were more interested in blowing up cities than

dancing by the seashore" (Morrison 2003, p. 8). The devastation resulting from this unwitting economic choice is manifold, as we are told that "what started as mule-headed act turned into crack-brained. In fact, folks who bragged about Cosey vacations in the forties boasted in the sixties about Hyatts, Hiltons, cruises to the Bahamas and Ocho Rios" (Morrison 2003, p. 88). This shows that the busy Beachfront Cosey Resort had been closed down for lack of patronage. Apart from environmental factors, political factors are blamed for the failure of businesses in and around the resort. The truth is that "neither shellfish nor integration is to blame. Never mind the woman with the conch-flavored steak, costumers will sit next to a privy if it's the only way they can hear Wilson Pickett or Nellie Lutcher" (Morrison 2003, p. 89). So, here again, it is made clear that Beach-front businesses do not close down only because of environmental factors but for socio-political reasons.

Apart from these obvious economic, human and social factors, ecological self-death and the self-destructive nature of the non-human environment, a hurricane had devastated the area. Before the hurricane came a drought that no one could explain. We are told that:

before Up Beach drowned in a hurricane called Agnes, there was a drought with no name at all. The sale had just closed, the acres barely plotted, when Up Beach mothers were pumping mud from their spigots. Dried up wells and brackey water scared them so, they gave up the sight of the sea...Rain water wasn't good enough

for them anymore. Trouble, unemployment, hurricanes following droughts, marshland turned into mud cakes so dry even the mosquitoes quit- I saw that as life simply being itself (Temple 2007, p. 424).

Because of the devastating impact of these natural forces, there is a limited human presence which inevitably leads to the precarious economic conditions of blacks in the Beach Front.

Other factors are bordering on the system of economic values which become an impassable bottleneck, narrowing irreparably the economic prospects of African Americans. They are that blacks have little or no prospects of finding a good job in a competitive and racially structured society like America. Junior is a near-social-outcast, reared by the outside world without due parental love and care. She is the last addition to the already tensed Cosey household. Although she survives the hurdles of the interview which would ordinarily become a barrier against surviving in a competitive racial enclave like America, especially when it comes to years of job experience, in which case the black candidate had never had the privilege of working before. The opportunities are therefore narrowed further. This is evident in June's interview with Heed Cosey where the latter is asked for impossible conditions that she cannot provide in her dispossessed condition namely, a job profile, referees, etc.

These bottlenecks become a strategic barrier designed by the American economic system to keep blacks deprived, depraved and financially sedated. Junior is homeless and jobless, which makes her

condition more precarious. And feeling dissatisfied with the self-recommendation of a total stranger like June, Heed probes her on to gain certainty about June's ability to keep secrets. June's reply remains resolved, assertive and vocal. She is resolved to keep secrets, to do anything within the recommendations of her employers to get the job. Heed is more interested in June's ability to keep secrets. She leans closer to June and repeats the question in a whisper, about if she can keep secrets.

Another cause of economic depression on the Cosey family is attributable to the ineptitude of the Cosey women whose consistent internal conflicts and increasing low-class status, the raggedy clientele were evident clogs to their economic progress. It is true, as:

...it came that: a commanding, beautiful man surrendering to feuding women, letting them ruin all he had built. How could they do that, Vida wondered. How could they let gangster types, dayworkers, cannery scum, and payday migrants in there, dragging police attention along with them like a tail? Vida had wanted to blame the increasingly raggedy clientele for May's kleptomania – Lord knows what those day workers took home-but May had been stealing even before Vida was hired and long before the quality of the guests changed. (Morrison 2003, p. 36).

The tremendous internal rancor and the racially motivated conflict within the setting are also some of the precipitators of the

obvious volatile atmosphere, which in many cases are strategic in clipping the financial wings of the blacks. "... but Vida had seen the water cloud before he drank it and his reach not to his chest, where the heart exploded, but to his stomach. Yet those who might have wanted him dead-Christine, a husband or two, and a few white businessmen" (p. 37).

White people become disgruntled with wealthy blacks. This is why "it comforts everybody to think of all Negroes as dirt poor, and to regard those who were not, who earned good money and kept it as, as some kind of shameful miracle. White people liked that idea because Negroes with money and sense made them nervous. Colored people liked it because, in those days, they trusted poverty, believed it was a virtue and a sure sign of honesty. Too much money had a whiff of evil and somebody else's blood. Mr. Cosey didn't care. He wanted a playground for folk who felt the way he did, who studied ways to contradict history" (p. 103). Society will rather prefer to see blacks live the usual beggarly and ridiculous life, either doing unprofitable menial jobs or living in wretched houses which James Baldwin would call a parody. But in Cossey's case, his rise to economic prominence is not only surprising but distasteful to the white community.

A problematic issue poignantly recreated by Morrison in *Love* is that of the ramifications of class and distancing of underprivileged blacks by whites and even by wealthy blacks. This is characteristic of Bill Cosey's distancing of the rest of the black community. Cosey does not mix with other people publicly, which is to say he employed them, joked with them, even rescued them from difficult situations. But

other than at church picnics, none was truly welcomed at the hotel stables or on its dance floor. Back in the forties, price kept most neighbourhood people away, but even when a family collected enough money to celebrate a wedding there, they were refused. Even May has imbibed these discriminatory reflexes. At the funeral celebration by the Johnsons, Morrison says "it was May who took time to snub the whole Johnson brood. She even objected to Papa's paying for the funerals- muttering that the boys had no business swimming in 'their' side of the ocean" ((Morrison 2003, p. 76).

Decrying the extent of intra-racial abuse by the Cosey's, Morrison corroborates a strategic economic bottleneck devised by the American system against blacks in the deliberate strictures built on bank policies deterring and discouraging black investors from bank lending. This contributes to the tense emotional cloud that defines the economic world of the Cosey household, vis-a-vis the African American economic status. After a prolonged lamentation of the failed, partial justice system against blacks, Cosey observes a more frightening and frustrating trend when he says with a slow wink to Sandler: "think about it, he said. A Negro can have A-One credit, solid collateral, and not a hope in hell for a bank loan. Think about that" (p. 44). Morrison explores these multiple dimensions of economic exploitation, strategic manipulative policies designed by a racial system to stifle the possible economic survival of black businesses, typified by the running of Cosey Resort. Folks were divided on whether to blame Cosey or his wife for refusing to sell land to local people, but would rather sell to a developer, "cashing in HUD money. By

way of fish fries, bake sales, rummage sales, and tithing, they had collected enough for a deposit..." (p. 45). Although Cosey was seen as a wealthy man, a 'dollar man', he is rather a generous and not extravagant man, because Sandler, his young friend began to observe through his close association with Cosey that, he did not use his wealth as a hammer wielded by a tough-minded man, but he saw Cosey's wealth more like the toy of a sentimental man. As much as he channelled his wealth toward building a business empire, it was obvious from his indulgence that he began to derail. One of the reasons for the economic crunch of the Beachfront Hotel and its environs was his derailment from the emotive investment in reality to an investment in pleasure. The pleasure principle took hold of him and his household. Apart from channelling their energies towards meeting economic needs as espoused by Freud's reality principle, another way to resolve the desires we cannot fulfil is by sublimating them. Sublimation is the act of channelling our desires for pleasure towards a more socially worthy end. It is the process of directing such emotional desires towards values that are socially oriented. In the Cosey business, there is no sign of commitment to the economic revival of their businesses. Rather, the women engage in petty gossips, open fights and lawsuits to appropriate his estate to them.

The American social and political imbalance derived partly from a capitalist tendency to classify racial minorities into demeaning enclosures and capitalist confines record a history-long strategy of racializing African Americans. Morrison's historical narratives generally prove that the United States of America grew more

oppressive in time. Therefore, the rebirth and assertion of cultural practices among African Americans, outright protests and several efforts towards socio-political and economic mobility become not only conscious steps toward self-discovery but intense hostility which becomes the inevitable corollary of their continued suppression. Eagleton (1992) agrees with this by stating that:

If a society has not developed beyond the point at which the satisfaction of one group of its members depends upon the suppression of another, it is understandable that those suppressed should develop an intense hostility towards a culture whose existence their labour had made possible, but in whose riches they have too small to share...a civilization which leaves so large a number of its participants unsatisfied and drives them into revolt neither has nor deserves the prospect of lasting existence (p. 161).

Therefore, the revolutionary fervour of the twentieth century especially is adjudged by this Freudian ideal as a human necessity for survival.

## 6. CONCLUSION

This paper has dwelt on the dimensions of oppression and the creative struggle for survival in Toni Morrison's narratives which unravel the unjust and endemic inequalities in American society. This obvious disproportionate economic imbalance on the nation's wealth-scape is revelatory of the extent of predatory opportunism and the weaponization of

poverty by a racist system, aimed at creating and entrenching an infernal downward spiral of poverty, strife and death among blacks. Her adroit re-enactment of the American wealth-scape reveals a disturbing socio-economic paradox of harrowing poverty in immense wealth; human indignity in the heart of humanity, shamelessness and dearth amid abundance. Through her artistic representation of a capitalist exploitative economy that is moderated by its beneficiaries, Morrison's novels explore strategies of economic exploitation, depression, devocalization and dispossession of her black characters. A psychoanalytic response to the disproportionate economic distribution on the wealth-scape of her fiction reveals a thematic thread in *Love* (2003) and *A Mercy* (2008), in which her characters are largely influenced by their chequered history. The economic outcomes of their lives become a direct result of their determination to succeed against all odds. Although, born into poverty, her characters are not resigned to the predetermined strictures of their tragic history. Rather they strive to assert their humanity and free themselves from the suffocation of racism and abject poverty. As a counter strategy, her characters realize themselves through economic mobility, socio-cultural cohesion and strategic bonding. A Marxist reading of the economic temperaments of the novels reveals a deliberate capitalist orchestration that is carefully designed to exclude blacks from partaking in the proceeds of their collective labour and national prosperity.

Morrison's textualization of the double signification of poverty in the midst of immense wealth eloquently

deconstructs the irrational modes of capitalism, while ideologizing racial harmony and equal economic opportunities. A New Historicist perspective in this analysis provides a basis for the explication and situation of these dominant economic factors and the corollary manipulative economic systems within different historical periods. It also reveals that wealth production, distribution and a myriad of other economic interactions in the wealth-scape of Morrison's literary world are trans-historical issues of which the resultant trauma and eventual psychosis are adequately mobilized by the characters to counter the system and surmount their problems in the quest for economic buoyancy and social liberation.

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