

Analysis of Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* From the Perspective of Gender Performativity

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Abstract

Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* capably combines the story of the black people in America with the gender relations, showing the author's concerns for the gender issues in an ethnic context. Based on Judith Butler's gender performativity theory, this paper regards the citation of the compulsory gender norms, discursive practices and performativity of the heroin Florens in Toni Morrison's novel *A Mercy* from the ritual, language and theatrical dimensions, so as to arouse people's attention to the gender relations in African American literature and broaden the research scope of the work.

Key words: Toni Morrison; *A Mercy*; Gender performativity

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INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison, one of the most outstanding African American female writers, was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993. In the prize motivation, Toni Morrison was regarded as the person "who in novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import, gives

life to an essential aspect of American reality" (The Swedish Academy of Arts, 1993). Morrison's works always discuss about the conflicts of race, class, and sex, extensively covering a wide range of the acute and significant issues in the contemporary world. Through the in-depth study of the novel, Morrison reveals her deep apprehension and consideration about the ethnic issues and gender relations.

Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008), a historical novel set in the second half of the 17th century, presents a picture of the embryonic America with characters of different races and genders. By a depiction of different gendered people in different ethnic groups, Morrison attempts to restore the history of American national construction and express her concerns about the gender issues. In *A Mercy*, Morrison reveals the essence of gender oppression through the portrayal of the typical male images exercising hegemony and the enslaved female.

Since the novel was published, *A Mercy* has been attracting the attention all over the world. Various scholars analyze it from the perspective of narrative device. The study tries to put forward the notion of textual space as a paradigm to explore the textual analysis from three perspectives with the application of Gabriel Zoran's spatial narrative theory (Lei, 2017, p.24). Some scholars study the novel from the perspective of trauma. Shang Biwu points out that "with the narrative practice of Florence and her mother, for example, *A Mercy* seems to offer a cure for trauma: the character narrators not only survive to tell the tale of trauma but also tell the tale of trauma to survive" (2011, p.93). Feminism is another important perspective in the study of the novel. Sui Hongsheng argues that the "west traditional femininity as an ethical identity plays a significant role in Florens's loss of selfhood and her growth predicament" (2017, p.93), while the process of her disillusion with the misleading myth and the reconstruction of her self-consciousness and subjectivity helps her to evade her predicaments.

From the above discussions, it can be seen that few scholars analyze the dynamics of gender identity in the novel *A Mercy* from the perspective of gender research. Based on Judith Butler's gender performativity theory, this paper will give a comprehensive study on the citation of the compulsory gender norms, discursive practices and performativity of the heroin Florens in Toni Morrison's novel *A Mercy* from the ritual dimension, language dimension and theatrical dimension, so as to provoke people's attention to the gender relations in African American literature and broaden the research scope of the work.

"Gender performativity" is the principal idea of Judith Butler's gender theory, which firstly appeared in her work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* in 1990. In *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (1993) and *Undoing Gender* (2004), Butler continues to improve the theoretical composition of gender performativity.

First of all, Judith Butler's gender performativity theory emphasizes that gender identity is the result of the citation of gender norms from the ritual dimension. According to Butler, a performative act is successful due to the echoes of previous behaviors and the power through "the repetition or citation of a prior authoritative set of practices" (2011, p.172). In *Undoing Gender*, Butler further puts forward the thought that "the field of reality produced by gender norms constitutes the background for the surface appearance of gender in its idealized dimensions" (2004, p.52). In other words, the realistic field generated by gender norms forms the background for the gender in its idealized dimension.

In addition, the gender performativity emphasizes the power of discursive practices on diverse gendered subjects at the same time from the language dimension. Butler considers that discourse produces gender identity with great generative force. She once said that "genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity" (1999, p.136). In a nutshell, there is no right or wrong gender, which arises only as the true effect of a discursive practice of the fundamental and stable gender identity.

Last of all, Butler's gender theory figures out the significant information of performativity from the theatrical dimension. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler pondered "gender, for instance, as a corporeal style and an 'act', as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where 'performative' suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning" (1999, p.177). In Butler's opinion, gender is not a being, but a performative act.

All things considered, performativity is a citational and discursive practice in Butler's gender theory, which produces the effect it names. The interior essence of gender is actually the repetition of a series of behaviors

subject to compulsory gender norms. There is no gender identity behind gender expression, which is only formed in continuous performative acts with the creation of a stable being. Therefore, the performative gender identities fundamentally negate the assumption of the philosophy of consciousness—there is a pre-existing rational subject, and destroy the basis of gender ontology, that is, the essential identity and the real subject epistemology.

In Morrison's *A Mercy*, the protagonist Florens's gender identity has gradually formed in the process of the constantly repeating gender norms with the weakness and dependence from the ritual dimension. In addition, Florens's discursive practices generate her mother's female gender identity and younger brother's male gender identity. Moreover, Florens's gender identity characteristics experience performative and dynamic changes.

1. RITUAL DIMENSION: NORM CITING OF GENDER IDENTITY

In the novel *A Mercy*, the protagonist Florens's femininity is a set of behavioral norms defined by culture, which is a way for female individuals to experience these roles by showing themselves to the world. Butler believes that "performativity is thus not a singular 'act', for it is always a reiteration of norm or set of norms, and to the content that it acquires an act-like status in the present, it conceals or dissimulates the conventions of which it is a repetition" (2011, p.12). There is no intrinsic quality of gender, which is the repetition of behaviors subject to gender norms. Western traditional femininity plays an important role in Florens's growth predicaments and is an important social and cultural factor leading to the loss of Florens's selfhood. The characteristics of femininity are reflected in Florens from the physical and spiritual dimensions. She has almost fully recognized and internalized these gender norms of femininity since childhood.

On the one hand, Florens's femininity in dress is the citation and repetition of the compulsory gender norms. Her preference for high heels shows the subtle influence of traditional gender norms on her from the physical aspect. For instance, "only bad women wear high heels. I am dangerous, she says, and wild but she relents and lets me wear the throwaway shoes from Senhora's house, pointy-toe, one raised heel broke, the other worn and a buckle on top" (Morrison, 2008, p.4). Even if her mother refuses, Florens presents the special partiality for high-heeled shoes, so as to construct her female gender identity from the physical aspect, which is a typical symbol of femininity in dressing and highlights her recognition and compliance with the gender norms. "Cultural intelligibility, as Butler deploys it, refers to the production of a normative framework that conditions who can be

recognized as legitimate subject” (Lloyd, 2007, p.33). The cultural intelligibility refers to the normative framework that prescribes who can be considered a legitimate subject. Florens, the black woman in this area, resorts to the image of high heels to shape her female gender identity and gain cultural understanding.

On the other hand, Florens is spiritually dependent on the male—the blacksmith in intimate relationship. The abandonment of her mother brought great psychological trauma to Florens. Therefore, Florens restores her desire for love on the blacksmith with the great obsession. However, her infatuated love for the blacksmith is not conducive to the construction of self-consciousness and subject identity. “No holy spirits are my need. No communion or prayer. You are my protection. Only you. You can be it because you say you are a free man from New Amsterdam and always are that” (Morrison, 2008, p.69). “With you my body is pleasure is safe is belonging. I can never not have you have me” (2008, p.137). Florens regards the blacksmith as her destiny and protection, which exaggerates the myth of male heroes and virtually dwarfs herself as a weak person in urgent need of rescue. According to Fedwa Malti-Douglas,

concepts that were considered masculine—such as light, straight, good, reason, mind, spirit, power, and the public sphere—are opposed to concepts associated with femininity: darkness, left, bad, irrationality, body, emotion, passivity, inferiority, and the private sphere. (2007, p.167)

Women are considered to be emotional, weak, family centered, dependent on men and passive. It can be said that Florens’s loss of self-consciousness and independence is the citation of the long-term indoctrination and influence of the western traditional femininity myth.

2. LANGUAGE DIMENSION: DISCURSIVE PRACTICES OF GENDER IDENTITY

Florens’s discursive practices on her mother and younger brother generate their gender identities. As a language practice, discourse is the center of the convergence of power relations. It has its own social and historical context and is the product of specific living conditions. Butler reckons that “performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate ‘act’, but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (2011, p.xii). The discourse produces the effect it names. Florens’s continuous discourse temporarily stylize and stabilize the gender identity of mother and that of younger brother. The gendered subjects are not only the material unit in the biological sense, but also the convergence points of power, knowledge and discourse.

For one thing, Florens’s discourse practice generates her mother’s female gender identity through the alienated language. Language is the thought of “mostly as

agency—an act with consequences; an extended doing, a performance with effects” (Butler, 1997, p.7). Discursive practice is a performative action with the effects that present. The undignified words used by the former to the latter—“a minha mãe” (Morrison, 2008, p.4), mother in Portuguese, is a naming discourse practice with the meaning of disappointment because of her mother selling her as a slave. When Jacob Vaark, the farmer, wanted her mother to pay off the debt, the mother replied, “Please, Senhor. Not me. Take her. Take my daughter” (2008, p.26). Florens believes that she is materialized by mother, which causes the great mental crisis and a serious lack of sense of security. “I can feel the drain. Something precious is leaving me. I am a thing apart” (2008, p.115). Florens is deeply distressed by her mother’s abandonment.

As the same time, the concept of male chauvinism has the deep impact on Florens. Therefore, Florens believes that when she chooses herself instead of her brother, her mother values boys over girls. This can be seen from Florens’s words as the narrator of the novel. “When I wake a minha mãe is standing by your cot and this time her baby boy is Malaik. He is holding her hand. She is moving her lips at me but she is holding Malaik’s hand in her own” (2008, p.138). Florens felt alienated from her mother by the latter’s love and care for her younger brother, who led his mother to sell her daughter into slavery.

For another thing, Florens’s discursive practice generates her brother’s male gender identity through the estranged language. “If a pea hen refuses to brood, I read it quickly and, sure enough, that night I see a minha mãe standing hand in hand with her little boy, my shoes jamming the pocket of her apron” (2008, p.3). Florens calls her brother as “her little boy” with great hostility, which further strengthens his male gender identity and shows the in-depth impact of phallogocentrism. Florens believes that her mother’s attitude towards her and her younger brother is different, setting her affection on the little boy but confiscating the former’s beloved shoes. For Butler, “by being called a name, one is also, paradoxically, given a certain possibility for social existence, initiated into a temporal life of language that exceeds the prior purposes that animate that call” (1997, p.2). That is to say, one is also endowed with a certain possibility of temporary social identity that transcends the previous purpose through the discourse from the language dimension. The language practice of Florens’s naming gives cultural attributes to her brother, the gender of the named object, and keeps it temporarily stable.

3. THEATRICAL DIMENSION: PERFORMATIVITY OF GENDER IDENTITY

Florens’s female gender identity becomes a free-floating artifact which experienced dynamic changes from the

initial weakness and dependence to the final independence, breaking the characteristics of secular femininity. For Butler, "there is no gender identity behind the expression of the gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expression' that are said to be its results" (1999, p.33). People's gender identity is formed through continuous performative acts. On the one hand, Florens's concept of family affection experienced dynamic changes from the initial misreading to the understanding of the true meaning of maternal love. On the other hand, Florens's view of love also experiences a dynamic change from the initial over-dependence on man to the pursuit of spiritual independence.

To begin with, Florens's attitude toward family affection experienced dynamic changes from the initial misreading to the understanding of the true meaning of maternal love. Due to the pursuit of family affection, Florens performs as the daughter of Lina and establishes a mother-daughter relationship. "Thereafter, the girl belonged to Lina. They slept together, bathed together, ate together. Lina made clothes for her and tiny shoes from rabbit skin" (Morrison, 2008, p.124). "They had memorable nights, lying together, when Florens listened in rigid delight to Lina's stories" (2008, p.61). "I stoop to touch it and remember how Lina loves to unravel my hair" (2008, p.102). Florens's playing the role of a daughter, establishes the closeness of family relationship with Lina, and obtains the maternal love from the latter. Her role-play reveals the performativity of gender identity and the instability of the regulatory gender norms, opening the resignifying space of gender.

At the end of the novel, Florens's mother argues, the reason of her abandonment is that it was more dangerous for Florens to stay around her in the living condition. On the contrary, the departure is a kind of redemption and grace for Florens from the perspective of her mother. Being female brought great suffering to their own existence. "To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below" (2008, p.163). The female gender identity is discriminated against, which causes both physical and psychological damage, and the abandonment of Florens. Florens's change in the name of her mother, from "a minha mãe" to "mother", also proves that she is mentally mature.

Additionally, Florens's view of love experiences a dynamic change from the initial over-dependence on man to the pursuit of spiritual independence at the same time. After being ruthlessly driven out by the blacksmith, Florens becomes disillusioned with all her dreams and wishes for the blacksmith. She gradually begins to become independent and brave. "But my way is clear after losing you who I am thinking always as my life and my

security from harm, from any who look closely at me only to throw me away" (2008, p.157). The disillusionment of love dream makes Florens awaken her self-consciousness and independent personality. This transformation not only fully embodies the profound influence of the traditional female gender norms, but also eagerly praises the female's reflection on the ethical identity.

CONCLUSION

As a female writer, Toni Morrison shows her deep concerns for the gender issues, especially the citation of gender norms, the discursive practices and the performativity of gender. In the novel *A Mercy*, the protagonist Florens's gender identity initially is the citation of regulatory gender norms with the weakness and dependence from the ritual dimension. Secondly, Florens's discourse practice generates her mother's female identity and her younger brother's male one through the alienated language, which expresses her disgust and resentment because of the abandonment of her mother. Eventually, Florens's gender identity characteristics experience performative and dynamic changes from the initial loss of subject consciousness to the final independence. In a word, the gender identity is not fixed but unstable, which breaks the thinking mode of dualism and needs the great inclusiveness.

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