

A Cognitive Approach to the Trauma Narrative in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*

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Abstract

This paper studies the trauma narrative of Toni Morrison's novel, *A Mercy* (2008), using a cognitive narratological framework. The authors, in this paper, describe the response the novel elicits from the reader. And the paper argues that multiple focalization, polychronic narration, and representation of inconsistent information enable Morrison to depict effectively the devastating effects of trauma—whether sexual, socioeconomic, or racial—on individual personality. Various characters of multi-ethnic origins narrate the novel and certain events are told repeatedly from different vantage points. Thus, the narrative calls forth continuous efforts on the part of the reader to process the complex and bewildering information emerging from the novel's storyworld. A cognitive approach to the study of the novel provides an understanding of the behavior of the traumatized and the impact of slavery on black people's consciousness and identity. Moreover, the approach gives insight into the manner in which the narrative engages the readers cognitively in such a way that it enables their comprehension of the relationship between individual trauma and social forces of injustice and oppression.

Keywords: trauma, narrative, cognitive, storyworld, polychronic, multiple focalization

1. Introduction

Following Gérard Genette's (1980) distinction between 'story' and 'narrative', this paper considers 'story' as the content which is told and 'narrative' as the manner in which it is told.

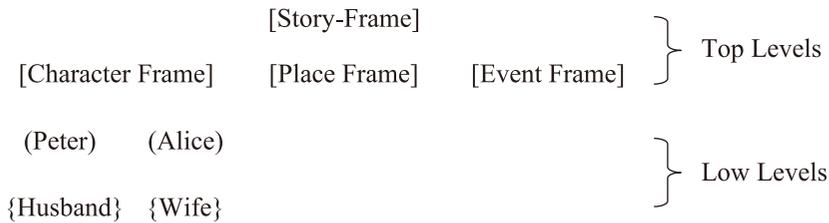
The distinction is observed on the premise that the study of narrative offers an interpretive framework to understand and analyze the story. Nonetheless, it is considered, as stated by cognitive narratologist David Herman in his article, "Limits of Order", that the "mode of telling also bear(s) crucially on—indeed, alter(s)—the matter told" (p. 72). Interpretation of story and narrative requires cognitive abilities that help us make sense of the world and thus cognitive narratological study forms the basis of the formation of storyworlds. Herman (2002) defines storyworld "as mental models of who did what to whom, when, where, why, and in what fashion in the world to which recipients relocate—or make a deictic shift—as they work to comprehend a narrative" (p. 9). The deictic shift is the ability of narrative to transport interpreters or readers from the here and now, or the space-time coordinates of a printed text, to the here and now of the world being described (p. 14).

Cognitive narratology has developed with research in the field of cognitive sciences including psychology, linguistics, and the philosophy of mind. In his article, "Storytelling and Sciences of Mind", David Herman argues that the trait shared by all research initiatives which can be grouped under the rubric of *cognitive narratology* is the connection between the study of narrative and the study of mind. This hybrid discipline explores frameworks developed in multiple disciplines for mind-related inquiry for the study of narrative. It also explores how insights emerging from the study of stories might contribute to cognitive science (p. 327). The cognitive tools used in this paper to study the narrative of this novel are knowledge structures termed as *frames* and *schemata*. Frederick Bartlett defines "schema" as a mental representation that grasps experiential information in terms of structures and structural relations (Holyoak, 1999, p. xlii). Human experiences stored in memory form structures, and these structures serve as the basis for building emergent experiences.

2. Methodological Framework: Frames and Schemata

This paper uses Marvin Minsky's frame theory propounded in his paper, "A Framework for Representing Knowledge" (1974). Minsky's frame theory is a coherent theory of cognition and provides illustrations ranging from visual perception, language processing, and story comprehension. For Minsky, a *frame* is a data-structure, which represents a stereotyped situation. Attached to each frame is information. Some of the information attached to such frames relate to what comes next. If the new situation does not confirm these expectations, then the information attached to a frame may change accordingly. Minsky explicates frame as a network of nodes and relations. The "top levels" of a frame represent things that are fixed and always true. The lower levels have terminals or "slots" which can assign conditions and specify data. This paper applies his theory to explain the process of formation of the storyworld as the narrative progresses. The conventional information that one may expect from a story-frame can be constitutive of characters, places, situations, and events. These can be assigned to the top levels of a frame. The lower levels of the frame must be filled with specific data. Emerging information from a

narrative brings transformations in the frames and updates the story building process. This can be illustrated in the following manner:



Narratologist Manfred Jahn in his article “Frames, Preferences, and the Reading of Third-Person Narratives” uses Stanzel and Bal’s formulations for the narrative situation and places terminal slots for four agents—narrators, narratees, reflectors and actors (p. 443). I propose that if a narrator functions as a reflector as well as an actor, then the same frame can accommodate the functions of a reflector and an actor creating narrator actor.

A *schema* is a frame-like structure which represents knowledge stored in memory and which is accumulated through experience. Previous experiences make structured repertoires of expectations about current and emergent experiences (Herman, 2002, p. 89). The complexity and duration of the processing time are reduced when the emergent information is matched with the pre-stored repertoire of stereotypical knowledge. The reading process activates the same mechanism with the reader’s pre-stored knowledge acting as the repertoire of expectations that match emergent details received from the story, which in turn constructs new frames that form the storyworld. In a multi-focal narrative, the story is conveyed from various perspectives, and thus, the reader receives overlapping information about, say, a particular event or character. The reader also confronts narrative gaps or inconsistent information owing to different versions provided by different characters. As new frames are formed along with the reading, these narrative gaps are gradually filled and narrative inconsistencies are adjusted. Such complexities are intensified in trauma fiction, which frequently exhibits breakdowns in the narrative (Hunt, 2010, p. 62) and poses difficulties in the building of the storyworld. One such storyworld is created through the narrative of Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy*, a novel that presents various vantage points on people, places, things, actions, and events. A cognitive approach helps to analyze the novel’s multi-focal narration by various characters and facilitates understanding of this trauma narrative. This paper first offers a cognitive study of the novel as a trauma narrative, and then gives a detailed cognitive perspective on the novel’s multi-focal narrative.

3. Narratological and Psychological Approaches to Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy*

Morrison (November 1, 2008) comments that her 2008 novel *A Mercy* is an attempt to separate racism from slavery, “to see how it was constructed, planted deliberately in order to protect the ruling class”. Set in the latter part of the seventeenth century, it explores the

time of early colonial Americas. Issues of race play out alongside the reality of gender, class, religion and geography. Its narrative structure permits multiple narrators to relate its plot in turns, a signature technique of Morrison's fiction, to which her readers have grown accustomed since her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (Jennings, 2009). A couple of critical works on the novel either carry narratological studies to offer new readings or focus solely on the psychological aspects. For instance, James Braxton Peterson (2011) examines how a deft deployment of focalization generates eco-critical and cartographic readings. Anna Iatsenko's (2013) narratological approach investigates the mechanism by which one character hands over self-responsibility to another and sees a deep emotional lack being fulfilled only by an outside presence. On the other hand, psychological approaches to the novel have looked into its narrative as the author's way to revisit African-American history, to enable its characters to construct their black identities and psychic integrity (Bernatonytė-Ažukienė, 2012; Ramírez, 2013). Most scholarly work on the novel recognizes the delineation of dispossession and trauma of slavery, but the very narratological foundation, which holds a mirror to this trauma, is sidelined even when acknowledged. The present study offers a bridge between narratological and psychological aspects to show how the narrative techniques deployed in the novel effectively reflect a character's traumatic state of mind. Moreover, a cognitive approach facilitates an explanation of the sorting process, which the novel demands during its reading.

4. Trauma and *A Mercy*

Psychological insights into trauma are crucial for understanding the nature of its representation in *A Mercy*, which portrays the journey of troubled characters who are either going through or are recovering from trauma. Nigel C. Hunt's (2010) research shows that trauma affects basic cognitive processes such as attention and perception. Traumatized people, according to him, are more attentive to and perceptive of surrounding stimuli, which remind them of the traumatic event (p. 61). In the novel, Florens, a slave girl, is traumatized by her separation from her mother. She is employed by a Church of England Dutch trader named Jacob Vaark in his homestead where she finds Sorrow, another slave girl, who is pregnant. Sorrow's pregnancy worries Florens as she is reminded of the trauma emanating from the incident when her mother gave her away to Jacob Vaark. The sight of "mothers nursing greedy babies" reminds her of her mother nursing her little boy and the thought of "how their eyes go when they choose" (Morrison, 2008, p. 6) brings back the memory when her mother chose to keep the little boy instead of her. Thus, the trauma of being separated from her mother has made her attentive to visual stimuli in her surroundings, which frighten her.

Along with fear, people undergoing a trauma experience a range of emotions such as helplessness, shame or anger. One of these emotions is a breakdown of identity, explicated by Hunt as an emotional concept called 'mental defeat'. "Mental defeat is a useful concept when discussing trauma and narrative, as it indicates a total breakdown in

the narrative that is difficult to rebuild and restore” (Hunt, 2010, p. 62). This breakdown in the narrative is caused because a traumatic event shatters one’s beliefs, including, as elaborated by Janoff-Bulman, our fundamental belief that the world is meaningful and benevolent and that the self is worthy (Hunt, 2010, p. 62). Recovery from trauma involves rebuilding these beliefs or creating a narrative. Dissociation is related to a breakdown of beliefs, which help in dealing with the world. According to P. Janet, memories associated with trauma remain unclear and unconscious and begin to encroach into consciousness over time, until they translate into narrative form through conscious processing. A traumatized person represses traumatic memories, but through constant repression, memories become subconscious and live apart from consciousness leading to dissociation (Hunt, 2010, p. 63). In the novel, memories associated with trauma repeatedly encroach into the character’s consciousness. A narrative account on Sorrow, a traumatized character, reveals that she could not recall things following a shipwreck, but she also pretended not to remember. By pretending that she could not recall the memories of her life spent on the ship, she represses traumatic memories associated with the shipwreck. These repressed memories begin to live apart from her consciousness, and when separated from the rest of her personality, they function independently in her psyche in the form of an imaginary companion named Twin.

Twin’s presence helps Sorrow to regain a sense of assurance and belief, which was shattered because of her harrowing experience on a ship where she lived before coming to Jacob Vaarks’ homestead. Thus a dissociated identity, in the form of Twin, helps her to deal with the adverse conditions of physical trauma. Gil Eyal in his article, “Identity and Trauma: Forms of the Will to Memory”, states that memory warrants identity. It is responsible for retaining the experience of “being a selfsame individual moving through time” and it helps to prevent the process of dissociation which psychic trauma sets in motion (p. 7). As Sorrow retains no memory of her past life, her memory could not warrant her identity and existence. Loss of memory led Sorrow to rely on her dissociated identity, Twin, to be assured of her existence. When Sorrow was saved from the shipwreck, she believed that she was dead until she saw Twin.

Trauma, according to trauma theorist, Cathy Caruth (1995), is a response to a traumatic event, which takes the form of repeated, invasive hallucinations, dreams or thoughts originating from the event (p. 4). The narrative of this novel traces the repeated recollection of traumatic events. For instance, Florens repeatedly refers to the incident when her mother gave her away; the narrative accounts by Florens, Lina, Rebekka and Sorrow repeatedly refer to the deaths of Rebekka’s children; Rebekka’s nightmares as a child were made permanently vivid by years of retelling by her parents. In this way, the novel evidently renders repeated recalling of traumatic events, which intrude into the characters’ consciousness. This repeated retelling of events lends a multi-focal (narration by various characters) and polychronic (repeated narration of a single event) nature to the novel’s narrative. Such a psychological insight into the nature of trauma not only makes explicit the process through which the trauma narrative is constructed but also reveals

how it is conceived by the reader.

5. Polychronic and Multi-focal Narration in *A Mercy*

Polychronic narration is achieved through recollections of memory. Montgomery, in his article “Got on My Travelling Shoes”, says that memory functions as a catalyst for the stories that fictional characters recount (p. 628) as they repeatedly recall past traumatic events. This repeated recollection of events causes a disrupted sequence of events in the novel. For example, Rebekka, experiencing physical trauma, confuses events and time and thus her narrative breaks the linearity in time. From recalling her conversation with Lina, she suddenly recalls her journey in a ship, then remembers her daughter and recounts the time when she was two years old. This disparity in temporality has to be constantly accommodated in the time frames that a reader constructs and eventually need to be matched with those related by other characters. The reader, reorganizing the time frames given by Rebekka, assigns the time when she was two years old as the time which occurred in the story before she made a journey by ship. The next time frame is slotted for the event of her daughter’s birth and then the event of her having a conversation with Lina.

For an understanding of the novel’s multi-focal narrative, it is significant to perceive the effects of a shift in focalization (i.e. shift in perspective) in the creation of the storyworld. Perspective formation is regarded as a major source for building the storyworld (Herman, 2002, p. 301). In narratology, perspective building is comprehended in terms of focalization. *A Mercy* skillfully employs focalization by creating varying perspectives through multiple characters. According to Gérard Genette (1980), if a story is told from the point of view of a character, it is known to be focalized through that character (p. 10). Genette classifies *focalization* into three types: *nonfocalized* narrative or narrative with *zero focalization*, *internal focalization*, and *external focalization*. Internal focalization is further divided into three categories: a) *fixed*- referring to narration from the point of view of a single character; b) *variable*- when the story is related from the point of view of one character, then shifts to another and then again from the point of view of the first character; or c) *multiple*- where the same event is related several times according to the point of view of several characters (p. 190). A narrative is externally focalized if the reader is not allowed to know a character’s thoughts or feelings and the narrator plays the role of a witness.

Joseph Flanagan, in his article “Knowing More Than We Can Tell: The Cognitive Structure of Narrative Comprehension”, while conceiving narratological research at the intersection of different disciplines, states that the cognitive perspective on a narrative views it as a mentally produced organization dependent upon the cognizing activities of an experiential or perceiving subject (p. 324). These experiential or perceiving subjects are characters in the story through which the reader perceives the storyworld. In this novel, though Twin is a dissociated identity of Sorrow, she provides a unique vantage point to the reader. The third-person narrative account on Sorrow introduces and

contextualizes Twin as a character who has control over Sorrow's actions and perceptions. Twin's consciousness and her conversations with Sorrow are presented in the form of *direct thought*: "Sorrow . . . crying, 'Don't! Don't' (p. 122); and 'I'm here,' said the girl" (p. 124). Direct thought, as defined by Alan Palmer (2004), is a kind of representation of fictional thoughts. Direct thoughts are thoughts of characters, which are tagged (marked with labels such as "crying" or "said the girl", and presented with quotes) as emotions, sensations, dispositions (p. 13). Readers bearing stereotypical knowledge of the fictional world neglects thought report (thoughts devoid of inner speech and conveyed without tags and quotes). Therefore, in contrast to thought report, more attention is paid to direct thought, which is regarded as direct speech, and it aids in giving strength and intensity to the character. This also brings to light Twin's control over Sorrow's actions and emotions. Through Twin's direct thought, the reader gets access to what she is thinking. By shifting the reader's perspective to Twin's thoughts, the narrative compels the reader to assign Twin the status of an entity capable of thinking independently.

In the novel, focalization shifts from one chapter to another, with first-person and third-person accounts of characters. The novel begins with the first-person narrative of Florens, a slave girl in search of her lover, the blacksmith. A third-person narrative brings about a shift in focalization and provides stories for other characters like Lina, Rebekka, Sorrow, and Florens' mother. Together the two modes of narration provide overlapping accounts of certain events, places, and characters. David Herman's understanding of the mode of 'perspective taking' bears a resemblance to Genette's views of focalization, since both structure perspective formation as the acquisition of vantage points provided by a character's point of view. An understanding of both of these concepts helps to infer that the storyworld is constructed part by part through a combination of frames defined by "contextual coordinates" (Herman, 2002, p. 303) which establish a point of view. Contextual coordinates, which define cognitive frames, are pronouns, articles, verbs of perception and cognition, and lexical items (p. 303). An illustration from the novel will help explicate how pronouns play the role of perspective taking. The novel begins with Florens' first-person narrative: "Don't be afraid. My telling can't hurt you..." (Morrison, 2008, p. 1). No lexical item has yet specified the frame for "my" and "you" as specific characters at this point in the narrative. The referent of "my" (the speaker who addresses) emerges as an extradiegetic narrator, i.e. a character which is presented with no intermediary narrating agent (Herman & Vervaeck, 2005, p. 81). Similarly, the referent of "you" (the addressee) has also not been specified. As the reader finds no referent for "you", he/she assumes him/herself to be the addressee of the narrative. Another reason, which leads the reader to make such an assumption, is the stark imperative sentence—"Don't be afraid", which calls the reader's attention. Thus, an immediate connection is established between the narrator and the reader, when the referent of "you" is assigned as the reader. This configuration can also be explored through a number of possibilities that the narrative posits:

- A. I = the author and you = the reader;
- B. I = the narrator and you = the reader;
- C. I = a character and you = the reader;
- D. I = a character and you = another character;
- E. I = a character and you = the dissociated identity of a traumatized character (such frame construction is possible in Sorrow's narrative account).

With such possibilities, the narratee can either have an immediate presence implied in the form of the reader or the narratee can be absent when not referred to immediately as a character but one which in all probability could be assigned later and reconfigured from the emerging details of the narrative. When *A Mercy's* narrator gradually starts to tell a story with "The beginning begins with the shoes" (Morrison, 2008, p. 2), she becomes an intradiegetic narrator, i.e. a narrator who is also a character in the story. With this emergent information, the narrator's frame is re-framed to accommodate the character frame for Florens. The difference and shift between the two frames ('Florens = narrator' and 'Florens = character') becomes significant for the larger storyworld as it gives Florens an advantage over the entire narrative which is evident from her first-person account placed before and after the third-person account of other characters.

Emerging information about characters and situations constantly force a reanalysis in the construction of frames. For example, the possibility of 'you' being a reader is eliminated as soon as the sentence "So when I set out to find you..." appears. The 'I' set out to find someone, i.e. another character. Therefore the frame "you = reader" is reformed as "you = a character". It is to be noted here that 'I', even at this stage, remains an unnamed voice in the novel. The above frame (i.e. the frame for 'you') expands along with the narrative and is not specified until page 42 of the novel, where it becomes "you = the blacksmith". So, the blacksmith is introduced directly at a very late stage in the novel despite the fact that he was indirectly introduced via conversations and recollections by other characters. Although the frame for 'you' is finally resolved here (i.e. page 42), the frame for 'I' is indirectly assigned as "a love-disabled girl" instead of being assigned as 'Florens' through a third person account of Lina's thoughts: "Why, she wondered, had Mistress sent a love-disabled girl to find the blacksmith?" (p. 42). Combining these two frames (for 'I') the final frame is deduced as—"I = Florens = a love-disabled girl". By employing such an oblique style of narration, Morrison increases the reader's interpretive competence. The reader's cognitive abilities are evoked, which enable him/her to comprehend the mutual relationship between the characters and how they establish a relation with the reader.

Another contextual coordinate which plays a crucial role in the construction of the storyworld is the role of 'a' in the Portuguese "a minha mãe" used by Florens to refer to her mother. Translated into English, the phrase means "my mother". However, a reader unaware of this usage may latch on to the indeterminate article in English 'a', and the phrase will be interpreted as "a mother" and not "my mother". This may cause an initial

indeterminate slotting of “the mother frame” (ambiguity between “a minha mãe = a mother”, i.e. someone’s mother and “a minha mãe = my mother”, i.e. Florens’ mother). This uncertainty skillfully stages the ambiguous relationship between Florens and her mother and presents the separation between the mother and the daughter as a major traumatic event in the narrative of the novel.

The first chapter of the novel also presents intermittent instances of internal focalization, with Florens being the internally focalized object as well as the internally focalized subject. Focalization can also be understood in terms of the perceiver and the perceived. When Florens relates her emotions, thoughts, beliefs and perceptions, she becomes the object of internal focalization. But when she relates and acts as the medium for the reader to perceive other characters through her point of view, she becomes the subject, i.e. the perceiver. On the other hand, in the third-person account on Sorrow, the narrator functions only as a perceiver, the subject who narrates. Bouson in his paper “Speaking the Unspeakable” states that Morrison represents with almost clinical precision the impact of shame and trauma on the individual psyche owing to racist practices on African-Americans (p. 126). It would have been more interesting if Sorrow or Twin’s first person account had also been given. The first person account would have rendered them as subjects who perceive, foregrounding the psychological impact of trauma on an individual’s psyche without an intermediary third-person voice.

A cognitive approach to the analysis of focalization provides crucial insights into the psychological nature of Sorrow’s narrative. While recalling her first encounter with Sorrow, Florens in her first-person narrative account points out that Sorrow was not happy to see her. The reader, from the limited perspective of Florens, believes that Sorrow was not happy to see her. The same event of their first meeting is revisited through Sorrow’s third-person narrative, which informs the reader that Sorrow was curious and happy to see Florens. Here, internal focalization brings Twin’s consciousness to the fore. We are told that Twin was jealous watching Sorrow’s happiness for Florens. Sorrow extended her hand to touch Florens and Twin cried “Don’t! Don’t!” (p. 122). As Twin is Sorrow’s dissociated identity invisible to others, she is not perceived by Florens. However, Sorrow, understanding Twin’s jealousy, waves her face away. This led Florens to feel that Sorrow was not happy to see her whereas she was. The inconsistent information that the reader receives from these two different accounts is incorporated in the following manner: the initial frame for Sorrow’s mental state is fixed as being happy and is structured to expect the same from emerging details. But these expectations are not matched due to contrastive details and thus, two separate frames representing two different mental states (of Sorrow being happy and not being happy) are constructed. These two frames are not combined but modified as per the new information provided by internal focalization on Sorrow and Twin. The third person narration on this incident not only gives an insight into the mental state of Sorrow but also that of her imaginary identical self-named Twin. Twin’s perspective can be considered as Sorrow’s reflected perspective. Here the narrative technique combines multiple internal focalizations (Peterson, 2011, p. 17) by focalizing Sorrow from two

perspectives—that of the third-person narrator and that of Twin.

Through an inventive use of narrative discourse, Morrison joins the stories of all the characters who in the collective recollections of memories bring together their stories of migration and experience of trauma. The repeated telling of the event when Florens was given away by her mother to Jacob Vaark bridges the psychic gulf between the fictional minds of the three characters and provides three different perspectives (that of Florens, Jacob Vaark, and Florens' mother) on the act of "a mercy" to the reader. Florens is constantly plagued by the image of her mother with the little boy—"Me watching, my mother listening, her baby boy on her hip" (p. 5). Vaark recalls the same event when he saw a woman with a little girl, wearing a pair of way-too-big woman's shoes. This woman, the mother of the little girl, requested him: "Please, Senhor. Not me. Take her. Take my daughter" (p. 24). Here the little girl is immediately identified as Florens and her mother as "a minha mãe". Towards the end of the novel, we find the mother's first person narration of the same event addressed to Florens where she explains to her that she sent her away with Vaark to save her from a lewd Portuguese planter. *A Mercy* thus engages in a "polychronic" style of narration, in which events are recounted in multiple ways by different characters (Herman, 2002, p. 219). Making a chronological sequence of events in such a narrative becomes a "part of the process of interpreting the story itself" (p. 212). A constant process of reorganization on the part of the reader helps reveal the disorder created in the narrative and how it functions to narrate trauma. Trauma emanating from racial abuse and slavery necessitates chaos in Morrison's novels that serves the purpose of establishing order and recovery from trauma. Elizabeth B. House in her article, "Artists and the Art of Living" points out that "without chaos, creation would be impossible" (p. 44) and Morrison, by employing a multi-focal and polychronic style of narration, calls forth the reader's cognitive abilities to organize this chaos created by trauma in her narrative.

The narrative technique of the novel also exploits "different ratios between story time and discourse time to create different narrative effects" (Herman, 2002, p. 215). Story time is the time represented by a narrative while discourse time is the time that is taken to narrate a story. The first person narration relating Florens' journey in search of the blacksmith proceeds more slowly than the third person narration of other characters. The longer duration of Florens' narration directs the reader's attention to her journey and, through a recollection of past events, the reader is acquainted with other characters, their mutual relationships and the events that occurred in their lives. The novel also employs analepsis and prolepsis. Analepsis, according to Genette (1980), is an evocation of an event that occurred earlier than the point in the story in which it is evoked (p. 40). On the other hand, prolepsis consists of "narrating or evoking in advance an event that will take place later" (p. 40). Teresa Bridgeman, in her article "Thinking ahead: A Cognitive Approach to Prolepsis", says that prolepsis or telling before time determines the nature of the information provided (pp. 125-126). *A Mercy* provides many instances of prolepsis, which at the point of their delivery are not realized as prolepsis by the reader. The reader is able to construct a fuller understanding of the event, place, and character that have

been the subject of prolepsis only when he/she encounters more information later in the narrative. When the reader confronts a proleptic account, he/she is only able to frame an incomplete mental representation, which is retained in memory and evoked at a later point in the reading process. The death of Sorrow's daughter is recounted earlier in the narrative timeline, presented in the form of Sorrow's recollection "of her baby breathing water under Lina's palm" (p. 121). This information is provided earlier than the information of her birth. In this way, a painful response to the death of Sorrow's child is elicited and it lingers during the reading of the account of her birth. The narrative strategy, in this manner, tactfully and effectively directs the reader's response. Similarly, producing a cathartic effect, the novel first engages in Florens' confessional tale of maternal rejection and its effect on her life but the cause of maternal rejection is revealed in the end. As suggested by Herman in his article "Limits of Order", the novel, by employing a polychronic mode of narration, where different characters relate a single event, thus arrives at causes, only after a painfully extended exploration of their effect (p. 73).

6. Conclusion

A Mercy challenges the unnarratability of the silence that results from trauma (Phelan & Rabinowitz, 2005, p. 224) not only by giving voice to this silence but also by foregrounding it through multiple narrators. This makes the narrative of the novel multi-focal (i.e. narration by many characters) and polychronic (i.e. repeated narration of a single event) and such a narrative arrangement structures a trauma narrative efficiently because the mental disarray ensuing from trauma is suitably represented by the disorder generated by these narrative techniques. In other words, the structure of this narrative resembles the psychological nature of trauma. Trauma disrupts a person's general knowledge, which consists of a person's beliefs, values, assumptions and perceptions about the world, and the novel gives the reader an insight into this disordered world. Even when one reads traumatic experiences of fictional characters, he/she unconsciously matches the frames constructed in the reading process with a personal repertoire of trauma experiences (Aldama, 2010, p. 42). This could be a possible research project for understanding the process of how a trauma narrative is construed to be aligned with the reader's personal repertoire of trauma experiences. It is the cognitive ability of the reader, which allows him/her to recognize the disorder in the narration and organize it to interpret the story. This process of organizing information has been described with the help of formation and modification of frames. In this way, a cognitive approach to the study of the novel's narrative addresses the reader's role in comprehending how we internalize the social forces of slavery, injustice and oppression operative in the systems of power.

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