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INTERCULTURAL IDENTITY NEGOTIATION OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN LINA IN TONI  
MORRISON'S *A MERCY*

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ABSTRACT

*A Mercy* by African American writer Toni Morrison combines the cultural and ethnic conflict and integration with the Native American female's growth, showing the author's concerns for intercultural identity negotiation. Based on Identity Negotiation Theory, the paper explores the cultural identity, ethnic identity and gender identity of the American Indian Lina in *A Mercy* from the three dimensions, namely, "cultural identity: security and vulnerability", "ethnic identity: inclusion and differentiation", and "gender identity: consistency and change", so as to interpret the process of Lina's cultural, ethnic and gender identity negotiation, thus injecting the new vitality into the intercultural identity negotiation.

**Keywords:** Toni Morrison, *A Mercy*, intercultural identity negotiation, American Indian

Introduction

Toni Morrison, as one of the most outstanding African American female writers, is the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993. Morrison's works have always concerned about the common destiny of mankind, both describing and transcending the boundaries of culture, race and gender. Valerie Smith, a distinguished scholar of African American literature, asserts that "Morrison shows us that however violent, exploitative, and dehumanizing, the history and experience of racial formations have led to complex and rich emotional, cultural, and artistic responses" (15).

Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008), a historical novel set in the last seventeenth century, presents a picture of the American Indian female Lina in the multicultural society, who suffered the oppression from culture, race and gender in the embryonic America. It was regarded as the top 10 books of the year by *The New York Times Book Review*, attracting widespread critical attention and praise. In the novel, Morrison breaks through the previous concern about the authentically black cultural space under the shackles of slavery, and extends the scope of American identity to people from different ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds, reflecting the diversity, openness and inclusiveness within the intercultural negotiation.

Since the novel was published, *A Mercy* has been attracting the attention. Kwangsoon Kim points out, "in her return to 'pristine' America, Morrison revises the American origins narrative and redefines American identity as fundamentally hybrid and multi-cultural" (83). Some writer further introduces that "the alliance of slavery

and racial discrimination is a historical evolution process of construction, institutionalization and legalization” (Ha 169). In addition, other critics analyze the novel on the basis of Camus’ philosophical thinking, believing that Morrison proposes the rebellion “by portraying the lonely individuals in the absurd world” (Wang 159).

From the above discussions, it can be seen that few scholars analyze the cultural, ethnic and gender identities in the novel *A Mercy* from the perspective of intercultural identity negotiation.

Identity negotiation theory widely absorbs the ideological elements of social identity theory, symbolic interaction sociology theory and the dialectical relationship in communication theory. Among all identities, cultural identity, ethnic identity and gender identity occupy an important position in intercultural identity negotiation.

Based on the formal ten assumptions, identity negotiation theory highlights the five boundary-crossing identity dialectical themes including identity security-vulnerability, inclusion-differentiation, predictability-unpredictability, connection-autonomy, and identity consistency-change across time, and the three identity negotiation competence outcomes: the feeling of being understood, the feeling of being respected, and the feeling of being affirmatively valued (Ting-Toomey 3).

As an interpretation mechanism of individuals in the process of intercultural communication, identity negotiation theory helps individuals to realize diverse identity interaction in communication, so as to achieve ideal communication effect. The five groups of dialectical concepts of intercultural identity boundary help people understand the character image and identity definition in literary works.

Morrison’s *A Mercy*, reveals the cultural dislocation, racial discrimination and gender oppression suffered by American Indian Lina within the process of intercultural communication in the particular historical period. Based on Identity Negotiation Theory, the paper explores the cultural identity, ethnic identity and gender identity of the Native American Lina in *A Mercy* from the three dimensions, namely, “cultural identity: security and vulnerability”, “ethnic identity: inclusion and differentiation”, and “gender identity: consistency and change”, so as to interpret the process of her cultural, ethnic and gender identity negotiation, thus injecting new vitality into the intercultural identity negotiation.

### **1. Cultural Identity of Lina: Identity Security and Vulnerability**

Individuals tend to experience identity emotional security in a culturally familiar environment and identity emotional vulnerability in a culturally unfamiliar environment. In *A Mercy*, Morrison vividly shows the intercultural conflicts and communications between the white culture and Amerindian culture in North American continent during the colonial period. Lina experienced the vulnerability of identity in the cultural assimilation of the white culture, especially the religious belief. Nevertheless, as the intercultural person, Lina adopted the negotiation strategy of mindfulness, recognizing the impact of the cultural differences between the white culture and Amerindian culture, and combining the two cultures to form a mixed cultural identity, thus keenly grasping the multiplicity in intercultural conflicts.

On the one hand, Lina experienced the vulnerability of the Indian cultural identity from the aspect of religious belief which converts from the animistic belief to Christianity. In order to strengthen her identity security, Lina constructed the Indian atmosphere, a culturally familiar environment, and obtain the healing power of nature.

Lina passively underwent the conversion of the religious belief to Christianity due to the spiritual assimilation of the Presbyterians, admitting that she was a non-religious barbarian who needed to be purified. As the inner cornerstone and spiritual colonization of white culture, “the Catholic Church provided for the spiritual needs of the settlers but also converted Amerindians and Africans to Christianity” (Bulliet et al. 491). Christianity is the spiritual means used by the white people to assimilate the ideas of Indians. Lina “acknowledged her status as heathen and let herself be purified by these worthies” (Morrison 47). Due to the fear of the loss of her refuge, Lina had to confess the fact of being pagan and convert her faith to Christianity, which strengthened her insecurity of her Indian identity.

Thus, after she was adopted by the Presbyterians, she tried to construct the Indian culture environment, and dialogue with nature, so as to obtain the healing power of nature and the security of identity. "She cawed with birds, chatted with plants, spoke to squirrels, sang to the cow and opened her mouth to rain" (48-49). The communication with animals, plants and rain in nature brought Lina great security of her Indian culture identity. The cultural system with animistic belief, as the core of Native Americans, has been passed down from generation to generation. As for Lina, she believed that Indian culture was about the great sacredness, religiosity and salvation contained in the harmonious coexistence between man and nature physically and spiritually.

On the other hand, Lina actively adjusted her frame of culture recognition, tried to understand the cultural differences between the white culture and the Indian culture through the intercultural negotiation strategy of mindfulness, an interpersonal attunement in connection with the culturally dissimilar other. She combined the concept of the white's culture and the traditional Indian culture to form a hybrid cultural identity, so as to relieve the identity vulnerability in intercultural communication.

She decided to fortify her by piecing together scraps of what her mother had taught her before dying in agony. Relying on memory and her own resources, she cobbled together neglected rites, merged Europe medicine with native, scripture with lore, and recalled or invented the hidden meaning of things. (48)

Her combination of the Indian traditional rituals with the European culture, especially medicine and knowledge adjusted the confrontation between the two cultures, and increased the sense of security in intercultural identity. Thus, Lina "found, in other words, a way to be in the world" (ibid). By exploring the tension between identity and hybridity, Lina tried to find the position of Indians in the mainstream American society and explored a new Indian survival mode, achieving the self-acceptance and identity affirmation.

## 2. Ethnic Identity of Lina: Identity Inclusion and Differentiation

Individuals tend to feel included when their desired group membership identities are positively endorsed and experience differentiation when their desired group membership identities are stigmatized. Due to racial differences, Lina suffered from the racial discrimination in the white society without the feeling of being respected. In the process of intercultural communication, the colonialism and white supremacy urged the white society to inflict the physical and psychological damage on her. Thus, in order to enhance her intercultural competence, Lina consciously learned the different racial knowledge of the black and the white, and cultivated an open and inclusive ethnic view in the intercultural communication.

For one thing, because of her Indian race identity, Lina suffered the physical and spiritual racial discrimination from the white society, namely, the despoiled land and the ethnic trauma.

Lina's lands in Indian tribe were occupied by the white with the loss of rights, which had broken her harmonious relationship with the earth and even seriously affected her survival. "Other than certain natives, to whom it all belonged, from one year to another any stretch might be claimed by a church, controlled by a Company or become the private property of a royal's" (12-13). The land of the indigenous people was forcibly taken away, and was transformed into the private property of the white people, the land grabbers. As Lina talked to the black girl Florens with her traumatic memory of the Indian tribe, "'you and I, this land is our home,' she whispered, 'but unlike you I am exile here'" (59). Lina was ostracized and marginalized on her own land with the great loneliness, which destroyed the integrity of her subjectivity as an American Indian. For Lina, land actually played a significant role in American Indian ethnic group, witnessing the vicissitudes of Indian history with the closeness of the Indians. As the famous American Indian writer Paula Gunn Allen said, "the land is not an image in our eyes but rather it is as truly an integral aspect of our being as we are of its being" (193). Such conception of tribe finds its echo in Lina with the great dependence on the land in the Indian tribe.

For another, in spite of the racial discrimination on her, Lina gained the accurate identity-based knowledge of the black girl Florens to enhance mutual understanding, showing her improvement of intercultural identity negotiation. She fostered an inclusive racial view in the intercultural communication with Florens, which fully demonstrated the flexibility, openness and inclusiveness of the intercultural personality.

Within the intercultural communication with Florens, Lina actively established a deep relationship through the way of story-telling, a traditional oral form of Indian culture, which strengthened her intercultural communication ability and created a good interactive relationship with Florens, showing her in-depth care and praise. "Not only was she consistently trustworthy, she was deeply grateful for every shred of affection, any pat on the head, any smile of approval. They had memorable nights, lying together, when Florens listened in rigid delight to Lina's stories" (61). By digging deep into the knowledge of the Indian culture and race, Lina satisfied the curiosity of the little girl Florens with the traditional Indian oral storytelling method full of imagination and creativity, and helped the latter, as an African American to find the meaning and happiness of life on this land, realizing the mutual trust and respect. At the same time, by telling stories to other races, Lina also successfully achieved the feeling of being affirmatively valued and it further shaped her Indian identity in which the world outlook and ethical values of the Indians are inherited and developed by her.

Similarly, Lina's identity crisis was also alleviated by the intercultural interaction with Florens. "Somehow, some way, the child assuaged the tiny yet eternal yearning for the home Lina once knew where everyone had anything and no one had everything" (60). Lina presented the positive function of the subject agency, slowly overcame the identity crisis and cultural trauma in the intercultural communication with Florens. In these cooperative settings, the positive goal interdependence between cultural/ethnic groups has been identified as the key causal factor in accomplishing positive interpersonal relationship and achievement outcome. The intercultural communication and identity negotiation between Lina and Florens was actually a kind of "cross the border" (Fiedler 289), aiming to "close the gap" (ibid) and show the understanding and accessibility between different races.

### 3. Gender Identity of Lina: Identity Consistency and Change

Persons tend to experience identity consistency in repeated cultural routines in a familiar cultural environment and identity change and transformation in a new or unfamiliar cultural environment. In the context of gender differences and patriarchy, Lina, as a female, suffered from the gender oppression of the Presbyterians and the white farm owner Jacob in which the consistency of her Indian female identity was changed. On the contrary, in the face of the difference in gender concept, Lina persisted in inheriting the traditional Indian gender equality concept and cultivating her own value discrimination, so as to play the intermediary role in the intercultural personhood with the stability of identity.

Lina's subordinated status as an Indian woman was particularly humble in a patriarchal society that valued white people and men. The Presbyterians took Lina as private property, and eventually sold her for their final profit. They posted the advertisements at the printer's house in town, "hardy female, Christianized and capable in all matters domestic available for exchange of goods or specie" (Morrison 52). Lina was regarded as the commodity by the Presbyterians with the loss of gender identity autonomy and agency in the marginal position. Furthermore, Lina, "nesting with the chickens" (50) at night, took on the backbreaking work in the daytime, but the same work was paid differently compared with other laborers in Jacob's farm. Therefore, no matter how hard Lina worked and how much value she created, "it was an unrewarding life" (ibid) for her, because it was all owned by Jacob. As Lina said, "Sir has a clever way of getting without giving" (7). Lina's surplus labor was exploited by the farm owner without the same wages.

As Morrison portrayed in the novel, "to be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below" (163). The gender oppression led to Lina's traumatic memory and the loss of the identity independence in the patriarchal society.

However, in the resistance to the white culture and the patriarchal mechanism, Lina consciously emphasized her gender subjective initiative, and reshaped her self-consciousness and independence of gender identity through maintaining the traditional Indian gender equality concept so as to keep the consistency of her gender identity. The gender equality constituted the traditional Indian values and had been passed down in their history and culture. "Of significance, this was most marked with Native American women who have a tradition of gender equality and complementarity" (Darlington & Mulvaney x). It could be seen that the Indian traditional culture recognized and advocated equality, complementarity and balance between men and women.

Lina emphasized that the differences between men and women existed in their own gender characteristics and social division of labor but their social contributions are the same. She had become an indispensable member of the farm by exerting her subjective agency and value, providing Jacob's family with the assistance and support in life quality and farm construction, to continue her struggle for the woman's discourse.

In terms of life skills, she could deliver babies, and use aboriginal incantations to exorcise evil spirits and pray for peace, successfully winning the recognition and respect of the white hostess Rebecca. Lina was "the only one left whose understanding she trusted and whose judgment she valued" (Morrison 72). Lina earned the hostess' trust and respect through the earnest dedication and value creation. On the farm work, she actively participated in the construction of the farm and assisted Jacob to manage the farm, teaching the latter labor skills, namely, crops growing, and poultry and livestock raising. Lina regarded the assistance and support for the family as "a sign of her own self-worth—a sort of keeping one's word. Honor, perhaps" (151). Her guidance and support to Jacob's family in life and farming symbolizes the selfless help that the Indians gave to the first European settlers, which promotes the positive intercultural communication.

### Conclusion

As an African American writer, Morrison deeply concerns with the negotiation of minority identity in a multicultural context. In the novel *A Mercy*, she combines the cultural and ethnic conflict and integration with the Native American female Lina's growth through the portrayal of the dynamic changes of her cultural, ethnic and gender identities.

Culturally, Lina suffered from the oppression of the European white's colonialism and cultural hegemony from the aspect of religious belief with the conversion from the animism to Christianity. However, Lina resorted to the negotiation strategy of mindfulness, recognizing the impact of the cultural differences between the white culture and Amerindian culture, and constructing the hybrid identity in multi-culture, so as to find the space for intercultural identity negotiation and the security of intercultural identity.

As for the perspective of race, the white supremacy physically and psychologically brought the pain of the racial discrimination on Lina. The dominant colonial white European society despoiled Lina's land and brought her traumatic memory. In order to better realize the intercultural negotiation of Amerindian identity, Lina consciously learned the ethnicity-based knowledge of the black and cultivated an open and inclusive race view in the intercultural communication, so as to show the positive impact of the intercultural personhood and improve her capacity of intercultural negotiation.

Additionally, Lina adhered to the traditional Indian concept of gender equality under the gender oppression of patriarchy, exerting her subjective agency and value, and providing Jacob's family with the assistance and support in life quality and farm construction, so as to create the self-value as an Indian female and acquire the trust and respect from the dominant society, which injected the vitality into the adjustment and expansion of her intercultural gender identity.

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