



A study of racism in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*

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Abstract

Race and gender signify the traumatic condition under which African American lived in white America. They are system of societal and psychological restrictions that have critically affected the lives of blacks in general and African Americans in Particular. Right from the days of slavery, the blacks, irrespective of gender had realized the cruel reality of racism. This paper examines how in *Song of Solomon* Milkman's racial identity, his "role" in life, and his individuality, also increase the meaning of blackness.

Keywords: race, gender, oppression, isolation violence, black, slavery

Introduction

During the years of slavery, the blacks were treated cruelly by the whites. They were a guaranteed source of free or cheap labor during slavery and for decades afterward. They were bullwhipped. It was a common practice to use a bullwhip and then rub salt, or a combination of salt and hot pepper, into the open wounds. Even among good masters, slavery was a dehumanizing system, against which any overt protest by the slave was immediately doomed. The slavery affected the black women too. Morrison's worries for the Black society and the protection of its unique culture can be found throughout her literary work. She always describes the themes of marginalization and alienation of blacks in the white society.

Toni Morrison presents the dialectical relationship between capitalism, racism and sexism in her novel, *Song of Solomon*. She subordinates sexism to racism and capitalism, knowing that the exploitation of the African woman by the African man is the result of his national and class oppression. Sexism is the result of the African's lack of race and class consciousness. *Song of Solomon* presents the importance of Africans awareness and acceptance of their history, for without knowing where they have been, African does not know where they are going. The novel also emphasizes that knowledge, acceptance, and commitment are needed to help liberate an oppressed people.

In fact, *Song of Solomon* provides an interesting example of the manner in which equations of power and the levels of class, gender and race operate in a literary work. Class, race, colonization and slavery—all of which are dominant parts of oppression—become in a large sense, metaphorical of the oppression of women. Though sexual exploitation of the female appears as an issue of prominence in this work just as in the first two works—*The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*—with the focus attention is more on the middle class. Morrison likes to portray women and their journeys, while the men are described as a part of the backdrop of the women's lives. But in this novel her focus is on a male protagonist. It seems a large shift, but the women play an essential role in developing the

men's lives. The novel describes two disturbing women, Ruth and Hagar. Ruth takes care of her father, husband and son for a sense of happiness, and Hagar follows the Western ideal that compels her to believe that she is not right for Milkman. Ruth is the mother of Milkman, but she is childlike in her temper, as is Hagar. But the immaturity puts the women back from developing their value and selves. These women play an important role in the action of the novel as well as Milkman's search for something more in life. His quest particularly takes the center of interpretation, but the role of Ruth and Hagar's struggles finally sets what Milkman is searching. In Milkman's life Ruth and Hagar cannot move beyond their prime existence, and because they are failed to grow spiritually as Milkman does, they do wrong actions.

Song of Solomon illustrates the effects of middle-class values on black families as well as an exploration of African-American culture and myths that depict the conceptual notion of the ethnic experience. Racism stays close in the background, but the actual presence of white America seldom intrudes upon the action in the novel. Most actions take place within the black community and the character's mental development progresses as a result of their inner growth, or lack of it.

Song of Solomon presents the story of a black family—Macon Dead, his wife Ruth Foster, and their children. Capitalist, racist, colonialist, even patriarchal, strategies show a marked interrelatedness in their attempts to culturally destabilize subordinated groups. Myths of superiority of the dominating groups over the dominated are made by promoting ideologies that have their basis in the hierarchical distinctions of color, class, sex, caste and religion. These ideologies work insidiously to systematically destroy the marginalized group's cultural heritage and beliefs while the marginalized receives in turn only a crippled culture. Guitar Baines' words to Milkman in the novel show the self-destructive nature of this part of black experience.

The violence that psychologically disabled any black in America is described through the character of Milkman Macon Dead, the young protagonist of *Song of Solomon*. The

very cycle of violence in Milkman's life has its root in his own family where Milkman finds himself entrapped. Being deprived of freedom and identity he too understands his father's footsteps, and becomes another money monger like Macon dead. The insensitive and selfish protagonist is an outcome of the very violence that springs from the question of identity and freedom. Having a wrong concept of freedom he joins Guitar, a member of the terrorist organization seven days. The novel covers the cycle of violence by presenting the cob-web like nature of it in the life of the protagonist whose search for an authentic an me and identity ends up in his becoming a thief trying to steal his own ancestral treasure. Because Milkman like his father considers wealth as the supreme human achievement.

Milkman is presented as a common man. As fur man said, "Milkman is a contemporary black man lost to his community, family and most important lost to himself. His true quest is not for fortune or honour but for his humanity. (Furman p. 63) Milkman is not able to empathize with his family of his people. He gets strength from his father's affluence and unconcerned about real life problems concerning real people. Till he moves away from the city, he never thinks that life could be different, that people could have attachment to the sol or that common human values could be cherished. It is possible to say his journey down south proves to be enlightening and the experience he gathers brings about a regeneration of sort in him.

A careful reading of novel helps us to explore the nature of violence in black men's world. It is a king of rejection from which the African-American women suffer. Women are rejected chiefly on the basis of physical appearance, while men's very entity is killed in the destruction of their pride in their race and culture.

In fact Milkman is a victim of the complexities sprung from the black solidarity. In his childhood and adulthood Milkman has to suffer psychic violence in the house of their inauthentic parent. He tries to preserve his lost position. By creating a new one where money and ownership play supreme. Macon dead Jr. continues to gain more property and money heedless to human values. He is unable to see that fellow blacks fear and dislike his power and ruthlessness while white respect his money not his person. Milkman learns from his father the lesson to "Own things. And let the things you own, own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too" (*Song of Solomon* p. 55). But it is important to notice how far Macon's concept of ownership takes him. He considers his family members as a part of his possessions. It is clear that at certain stage of his life Milkman begins to count himself among things. Like his mother Ruth, he tool thinks that he was "pressed small Pressed into a small package" (*Song of Solomon* p. 124).

This suppressed sense of self Milkman experiences is suggestively delineated through his nickname "Milkman". Names play an important role in Morrison's fiction. Deprived of their name and identity during slavery every African-American considers him/herself inauthentic and rootless. Misnaming or nicknaming shows the inauthentic identity of a person. Milkman's name suggested the violence done to his mind and body. If name authenticated one's existence and identity then it can be said that Milkman's entity as a man is

strongly distorted and mutilated in his name. in spite of Milkman's innocent part in the whole play his name denies him that position and pride supposed to be essential in a man's life. It is observed that this very name gives birth to suspicion in the mind of his father who questions his legitimacy.

By revealing the inner mind of Macon one can see the impact that any name can have. It can be said that names that have positive meaning in them trigger positivity in human personality. But nicknames that bear of ask for unwanted interpretation certainly tend to be violent for healthy personality growth. In the light of this view it is possible to say that Macon's doubt about his son's name, thus this his identity, in a sense leads to the questioning of his very existence. Milkman uncertain existence resulting from his father's inability is to make out any definite meaning for his son's name.

The novel present how Milkman is rejected even before his birth by his father's attempt to destroy him in the womb. It is possible to argue that Milkman is metaphysically disinherited from an authentic ancestral identity through Macon's resistance to his name.

Milkman's very sense of being is violated by the complete paternal rejection complexities can be seen in Ruth, Milkman's mother. Rejected in the world of her husband, constantly deprived of her husband, constantly deprived of her true position in everybody's life, Ruth becomes so unstable that the need someone through whom she can articulate herself. Macon treats his family like dirt and rejects their true valued in his life. For a black woman the only available to her (Ruth) is to cling to her child which Ruth does with such passion that it stops all possibilities for mental and physical growth in Milkman.

The novel gives example to the fact that long deprived of her husband attention Ruth took Milkman as a "replacement" of her husband in her life. In fact her nursing him beyond infancy and Milkman's retrospective analysis of this act reveals. With a lot of embarrassment and pain, Milkman that even for his mother he is not the one that directly relates a child to its mother. "My mother nursed me when I was old enough to talk, stand up, and wear knickers and somebody saw it and laughed and that is why they call me Milkman and that is why my father never does." (*Song of Solomon* p. 78).

Song of Solomon describe the Macon Dad's household is certainly a model of black capitalism. Macon. Is the city's most affluent black property owner leading a life governed by greed and acquisitiveness? He has strong need for money and power. He believes that "money is freedom" (*Song of Solomon* p. 164). He marries Ruth only because of her money and status. He hates his wife and terrorizes other members of his family. He is so money-oriented that he breaks his relationship with his poor sister. Pilate, and advises his son to steer clear from her. He has fear for his son; Milkman may be influenced by Pilate's unhealthy, un materialistic ways Macon advises his son: "Let me tell you right now the one important thing you'll ever need to know. Own things." (*Song of Solomon* p. 55).

Pilate lives in south side in a narrow single story house with no electricity or gas. She is generally untidy and smelly, and is the town's bootlegger and sings in the streets "Like common street women."

Milkman's mother, Ruth is an elitist as he is. As the only daughter of the most important Negro in the city, Dr. Foster, that is a classic example of the black bourgeoisie. Macon later advises his son: "Negroes in this town worshipped him. He didn't give a damn about them though called them cannibals." (*Song of Solomon* p. 71). About the theme of *Song of Solomon*, Richard K. Barksdale writes that Morrison "turns upside down many of the established social, moral and cultural beliefs that the western world has inherited from the Judaeo-Christian and Greco-Roman traditions." (Barksdale p. 465)

As regards the structure of the novel, Barbara Harris comments: "The textual richness of the novel derives from a present which spans three generations, with each narrative tied back into the development of the novel's hero. The digression, explanations, and expansions which interrupt Milkman's own story suggest not a serial of chronological unfolding but an interlace, in which dominant narrative is embellishment and enhanced through meticulously articulated subplots and images threading their way through their way through Milkman's life." (Barbara p. 79)

The above two critical statements indicate that in structure and in theme, *Song of Solomon* is a more advanced work than either *The Bluest Eye* or *Sula*. Morrison is more aware that the African male's exploitation of the African female is related to this oppression. She creates a male as protagonist, one who must first become conscious of himself in relationship to his people and then, as a consequence, reject the individualistic, vulturistic class aspirations of his oppressor before experiencing a wholesome relationship with a woman. Cynthia Davies has a different explanation of Morrison's use of a male protagonist, "Morrison is quite able to show black women as victim, as understanding narrator, or even as 'free' in the sense of disconnection. But when the time comes to fulfill the myth, to show a hero who goes beyond independence to engagement, she creates a male hero. Her emphasis on the effect or particulars on meaning raises questions about at choice." (Cynthia p.337)

To fully understand the protagonist growth, it can be by three different yet interconnected developmental stages- the pre-luminal stage, the limier stage and the post limial stage.

Milkman's pre-luminal stage is marked by his low level consciousness about his people's race and class oppression demonstrated in his very nickname- Milkman. As his name suggest, he milks women and give nothing in return. Even at the age of thirty one, he knows very little about women. In other words he is so ignorant that he is unable to distinguish his sister from his mother. Nor can he think of women as human beings, not even his mother. "Never had he thought of his mother as a person, a separate individual with a life apart from allowing or interfering with his own." (*Song of Solomon* p. 75). All the women in the novel give prime importance to Milkman and do everything for him. His mother, Ruth, bestows him undivided attention. His aunt, Pilate, loves him as his son she never had. To Hagar, his lover, he is the center of her life, her body and her affection. But Milkman is the epitome of self-centeredness, heartless and insensitive. He thinks of himself as a king who rightly deserves all this female homage.

Like his father, Milkman sees a woman, only as 'need

providers'. He does not know how to respect a woman. The women in his house clean, cook and keep house for him, and generally shape their lives around his needs. He takes all this for granted and abuse the women in his family including his mother, never bothers to know them and their suffering. As his sister says in a rage:

You've been laughing at us all your life.... Using us, ordering us, and judging us: how we cook your food; how we keep your house our girlhood was spent like a found nickel on you. When you slept, we were quite; when you were hungry, we cooked; when you got grown enough to know the difference between a woman and a two-toned Ford, everything in this house stopped for you... And to this day, you have never asked one of us if we were tired or sad wanted a cup of coffee. (*Song of Solomon* p. 215).

There are two women in the novel Ruth and Pilate dead who are brilliantly contrasted with each other. Ruth is a society-lady, whereas Pilate is totally outside the society. As the daughter of the only black doctor in the town, Ruth is presented in the novel as the underside of the ideal southern LADY image. She is imprisoned by her father who tries to make her into his girl-doll. Her husband who marries her because of her class position, has despised her due to his inherent weakness. Ruth's life is one of uneventful waste; she is the symbol of terror that awaits those women, who become the emblem of man's wealth and class position. On the other hand Pilate is a woman completely outside societal structures. She is the guide in the novel to essences beyond outward appearance or material things. She is also the embodiment of the tradition of her family.

Both Ruth and Pilate come together in the novel the upper middle—class lady and the conjure woman to save Milkman. "There similarities were profound. Both were vitally interested in Macon Dead's son and both had close and supportive posthumous communication with their father." (*Song of Solomon* p. 139).

It is Pilate, who first forces him to confront his identity as the living dead who sucks the life forces from his people. Milkman learns from her the essence of life. But Milkman gives her in return for life is the murder of her daughter and the theft of her father.

Moreover it is Hagar who is most exploited by Milkman. She really loves Milkman but in spite of loving her he uses her solely as a receptacle in which to empty his lust, thinking her his 'private honey pot'. She bestows him all her love, unconditionally and absolutely, telling herself that he would marry her someday. But Milkman uses her like a wad of chewing gum. This breaks Hagar's heart. She goes almost losing her mind and finally dies a wretched death. It is excitement and passion that he wants in Hagar, not steadfast love. On the other hand, Hagar gives all her devotion to her relationship with Milkman. She commits but Milkman avoids commitment and strong feeling.

In fact, the women of the novel become the method by which to measure Milkman's maturing race and class consciousness. Pilate's role in the novel is related to Milkman's developing consciousness. When Milkman first meets her, she is sitting with one foot pointing east and one west: east points to Africa and its culture and, thus, to Milkman's past; west point us to the western world and its culture and, thus, to Milkman's

present and future. Pilate becomes the bridge that connects the two. It is she from whom Milkman must build his race and class consciousness.

Milkman lives the limbo life of the living dead, always struggling to make up his mind whether to go forward or to turn back. He does not know the fact that responsibilities are an integral part of life. Milkman's race consciousness can be judged by his relationship with local community as well as his awareness of national events that affects African people. Milkman is isolated from his people that he is the last to know about the relationship between Henry Porter and his sister. Milkman is fed up by all other events, revealing his complete estrangement from the community.

Milkman's class consciousness is as weak as his race awareness. He believes the philosophy of his father that to make wealth is the goal of life. Milkman has no regard for the people in the community. As a result the people have little regard for him. In order to form close ties with the community, Milkman must leave the Macon Dead mentality and love people more than his money like Pilate.

Milkman's death wish, as Mbalia opines, is "a necessary phase in his development, for his confrontation with and subsequent defiance of death teach him both sensitivity and sympathy, allowing him to look beyond self" (Mbalia p.29)

Milkman's luminal stage- a period of growth can be described by his increasing awareness of race and class. His awareness of race is made more moving by his personal confrontation with the police. He feels bad of his father who buckles before the policemen. Milkman is proud of Pilate who sacrifices her dignity and life in poor Pilate than in rich Macon increases his class-consciousness.

His initiation into the society of the Shalimar hunters characterizes Milkman's post luminal stage, which marks the height of his awareness. Milkman, after his initiation into a new society, accepts the responsibility of adult hood and African hood for "he had stopped evading things, sliding through, over, and around difficulties" (*Song of Solomon* p. 271). Milkman starts giving respect to the natural world rather than the material world; he becomes a more balanced person:

There was nothing here [on the Shalimar hunt] to help him – not his money, his car, his father's reputation, his suit, or his shoes. In fact they hampered him.... They [the hunters] hooted and laughed all the way to the car, teasing Milkman, egging him onto tells more about how scared he was. And he told them. Laughing too, hard, loud and long. Really laughing. (*Song of Solomon* p. 277-80)

As regards race, Milkman's higher level of awareness is exemplified on the two occasions when he comes to know about his grandfather's murder and he takes part in the Shalimar hunt. Milkman first learns of his grand father's murder from Pilate, he has a low level of race consciousness. When he hears of the murder for the second time, he becomes angry and ask why the Danville Africans did not seek revenge: "and nobody did anything? Milkman wondered at his own anger, he hadn't felt angry when he first heard about it. Why now." (Mbalia p, 56) On this occasion his anger is aroused, because of his heightened awareness of himself and other African-American folk. Ultimately his consciousness manifests itself in a sincere love for his people.

Milkman's class consciousness is also intensified during the

Shalimar hunt. Now he begins to respect and love his people and tradition like Pilate who plants the seed of humanism in him. As far as gender is concerned, it is only after Milkman has revolutionized his consciousness regarding race oppression and class exploitation that he sheds his patriarchal attitude. Pissing on Lena, squealing on first Corin Thians, spying on Ruth, stealing from Pilate, and killing Hagar are evidence of Milkman's low level consciousness. Now after being in touch with Pilate Milkman has removed himself of the ruling class's views of race and class superiority that he is able to see women as his equals and understand the reciprocal nature of human relationships. For, trained by his father, he has never bothered to cherish human relationships. The most significant example of Milkman's awareness is that he has committed to guide Pilate to Shalimar to bury her father's bones, just as she had guided him to bury the Dead in him. Milkman becomes the source of life for those who are in need. Thus, the name, 'Milkman' signifies a more positive meaning. At last he rejects his father's materialism and accepts Pilate's humanism.

Milkman's developed consciousness is firmly grounded in his journey to the south, a journey which opens his eyes and his mind: with two exceptions, everybody he was close to seemed to prefer him out of this life. And the two exceptions were both women, both black, both old. From the beginning, his mother and Pilate had fought for his life, and he had never so much as made either of a cup of tea. (*Song of Solomon* p. 331).

Milkman gives credit of his growth as a man into mature adulthood to Hagar's sacrificial death and Pilate's far – seeing wisdom. His knowledge liberates him and he then begins to respect the poor African-American around him, as well as all the helpful women. Thus, Milkman is able to understand the significance of life, its shallowness, artificiality and false values. He understands the emptiness of his past life stretch before him. The Shalimar journey teaches him the essence of human relationships and exposes him to a non- modified way of life he has never seen before. At the end of the novel, we see a new Milkman- a man whose physical and geographical journey has enabled him to grow spiritually and emotionally. He is a changed man, a man who repents for his past sins, and his vast ignorance. Pilate is dead, but he embraces her mental of honesty, humanity, wisdom and clear sightedness. Thus, Milkman discovers that there is hope for the future, and that Pilate's prophecy comes true: "He don't know what he loves, but he'll come around one of these days." (*Song of Solomon* p. 55)

It is possible to say that Milkman's awareness of the racial problem is very central to his quest. He tells Guitar: "Whitemen want us dead or quite- which is the same thing. They want us, you know, 'universal' human no 'race consciousnesses.' Tame except in bed. They like a little racial loincloth in the bed they want us to be individual". (*Song of Solomon* p. 222)

Thus realizing this fact that to overcome his crisis he must first see how he became crisis- ridden, thereby knowing his history, Milkman comes to learn how operates at the levels of class, race and gender, what is more, learns to identify himself with the African masses and not like Sula, to distinguish himself from them. However, it is important to remember that

such a realization and identification are not enough. Milkman must understand that his awareness of the common oppression of African people as manifested in their history and in their present is relevant only if it used to struggle against the cause of that oppression. Unfortunately Milkman sees himself as an African exploited by capitalism and oppressed by racism, but offers no solution to this dilemma. While his race and class consciousness develop sufficiently to allow him to recreate self, it never reaches the point where he moves beyond self-healing to other- healing. To conclude, *Song of Solomon* proves the effect of middle – class values on African-American families. Like Alex Haley's *Roots*, it shows the important of African awareness and acceptance of their history in order to liberate themselves from oppression. Though Milkman's quest for self is the important thread of the novel, the major obstacle he has to control is the deadening effect of capitalism. He is moved into a search for a self as a result of his desire for gold. The long journey takes him back through his personal past to his racial history. His knowledge liberates him, and he continues to respect the poor African-Americans around him as well as the sweet women, Pilate and Hagar, who have constantly helped him.

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