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A Journey To Self-Discovery: A Study Of Toni Morrison's Song Of Solomon

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Abstract
Celebrated American writer and Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison brings to her readers, the entire sweep of the lived experiences of Black American life. Her narratives reveal haunting truths about the struggles and the pains, the dreams and failures, the strengths and resilience of the black people as they search for survival and wholeness in a world determined to hate and break them. Morrison began by writing The Bluest Eye (1970) to describe a young black girl's misguided quest for an acceptable identity in an external image. Her second novel Sula (1973) is about a young black woman whose idea of selfhood runs into conflict with the norms of the community. Morrison's third novel Song of Solomon (1977) adds a richer perspective in her literary representation as it explores the black man's quest for his authentic self. The protagonist of the story is the wealthy but discontented and confused young black man called Milkman Dead. Milkman's life takes a different turn after he travels to the rural South to seek a hidden treasure in caves of Pennsylvania which leads him instead to a discovery of his ancestral roots. His literal journey becomes symbolic of a spiritual process of rebirth into a life enriched by a discovery of his history and love for his people. The present paper attempts to examine the novel along the lines of a bildungsroman story as it traces the spiritual growth of the protagonist and his evolution in the course of his journey of self-discovery.
Key-words: *Black, Quest, Identity, Community, Roots, Bildungsroman.*

INTRODUCTION:

Morrison wrote *Song of Solomon* when her personal life faced various challenges such as financial problems, looking after two growing sons as a single mother and also the death of her father. Morrison definitely found it challenging to work on a story with a male protagonist. Thus, she had to look for models from the men in her family including her grandfather. *Song of Solomon* weaves together some of the striking elements of black American culture, classical mythology, European American literary style and Christianity. It was published in 1977 and became one of her most popular and acclaimed works. It was awarded the National Book Critic Circle Award for fiction for that year besides featuring in the New York Times Book review

DISCUSSION:

The novel revolves around the story of a young black man called Milkman and traces his journey to achieve an authentic black self. Macon Dead is a wealthy black capitalist who lives in Michigan. He builds a successful real estate business and becomes the richest man in the town. He is a person who defines life and people in terms of money and 'who distort life, bent life for the sake of gain' (New Dimensions, 113).He marries his wife Ruth for money and status. His son, Macon Dead Jr., nicknamed Milkman is a disinterested and alienated boy. Milkman's only joy comes from visiting his aunt Pilate who is regarded as "ugly, dirty, poor and drunk" but who is neither drunk nor dirty (Morrison 38).Pilate introduces Milkman to the joys of a home which he has never known in his own. He falls in love with his cousin Hagar, the granddaughter of Pilate. But his meanness and selfishness make him abuse her love for him. He repays Pilate's love by conspiring with his father and and his friend Guitar to steal her sack, assuming that it contains the gold she and Macon, as children, discovered and left inside a cave in Pennsylvania. But they are greatly disappointed and also surprised to find in the sack, not any gold but only bones, and they end up being arrested. Milkman becomes ashamed of his lowly act when Pilate rescues him from the police. Gradually, he begins to experience a deep confusion in his life. His life seems meaningless and he desperately yearns to escape from it. He decides to leave Michigan to find the treasure that Pilate left in the cave in Pennsylvania.

Milkman's decision to move out of his death-like-existence signals an important turning point in his life. But Milkman is yet to understand the true concept of freedom. He is just like the male Peacock which cannot fly because of "too much tail" (336). He feels that gold will liberate him from his family and responsibilities and give him a new sense of identity, never imagining that he would soon be seeking something other than gold and reach an uncharted destination of his life.

The second half of the novel describes Milkman's movement from northern urban Michigan to the rural South from where it becomes a quest story. The fairy tale reference to Hensel's and Gretel's discovery of the house of candies in the woods highlights the deceptive nature of Milkman's quest for the gold. The people at Danville warmly receive him as though he was one of them returned home. Reverend Cooper and the men give him information about his family history. Milkman further meets the extra-ordinarily old and wise woman called Circe who provide further details about his past including the names of his grandmother, Sing who came from Shalimar, misspelled as 'Charlemange' and his grandfather, Jake. Circe significantly inspires Milkman's racial consciousness. In fact, Circe signifies the voice of the past and the eternal black spirit which guides him in his journey to his roots. Circe directs him to the cave where he would find the gold. Sadly, upon reaching there, he fails to find any. Milkman now heads for Virginia, the initial home of his ancestors. The Shalimar experience marks another important point of contact with the elemental African life and values and a critical phase of Milkman's spiritual education. Interestingly, just after a few minutes of his arrival in Shalimar, he sees a group of children who are singing a song as they play "Jay the only son of Solomon. Come booba yalle, come booba tambee"(264).

Through a series of experiences in the Shalimar community, Milkman is stripped of his false egotism before he eventually achieves his authentic self. His ignorant and offensive comments about the Shalimar men and their women lands him in a fight. It teaches him that his snobbishness does not permit him to disregard people. His participation in a hunt along with the Shalimar men becomes another initiation rite. In the dark wilderness, far away from civilization, Milkman contemplates on his past and present. He realizes his selfishness:

He thought he deserved only to be loved from a distance though- and given what he wanted. And in return he would be what –pleasant? Generous ? Maybe all he was saying 'I'm not responsible for your pain. Share your happiness with me but not your pain (280).

He regrets his inhuman treatment of Hagar as he learns about the significance of human connection. The silent and dark night beholds an awesome moment when the alienated and self-centered egotist suddenly ceases to exist .That is to say, the release from alienation brings him the knowledge that life is defined, not by wealth or status but the fundamental human potential for struggle and survival, "what he was born with and had learned to use. And endurance" (277).He is now able to commune with the earth, the trees and animals, to feel them and listen to their language. His sixth sense perceives Guitar's approach to kill him and enables him to save himself from almost dying at the former's hands. After his death experience, a new Milkman is reborn. The spiritual development culminates in his rebirth. The experience of love with Sweet introduces Milkman to the healing and reciprocal nature of human relationships.

He remembers his family and misses Pilate most. He now comes to understand the people back home whom he was so desperate to leave behind and his heart swells with love for them. Little does he know of Hagar's death but his heart is moved with remorse for having been unduly cruel to her. As he listens to the children's song for a second time, he discovers it to be a version of the song which Pilate frequently sings 'O Sugarman, done fly away (5). He gathers from Susan Byrd, the Indian woman, the story about Solomon. Solomon is discovered to be his ancestor, a legendary character whom the Shalimar folks believe, literally flew back to Africa, leaving behind his wife Ryna and their twenty-one children .As the story goes, Solomon attempted to fly away with his youngest child, Jake but had to drop him down. The heartbroken Ryna became mad with misery and the children, taken under the care of Heddy, an Indian woman. Her own child Sing went away with Jake from Shalimar in a wagon carrying slaves to Danville, Pennsylvania. Now the fragmented pieces of his past become a coherent whole. He recognizes the importance of names. On the way back home, the road signs he sees tell the stories of the many names and lives that were buried underneath:

The Alongquins had named the territory he lived in Great Water, *michigami*. How many dead lives and fading memories were buried in and beneath the names of the places in this country. Under the recorded names were other names, just as "MaconDead," recorded for all time in some dusty file, hid from view the real names of people, places and things (329).

The retrieval of names ignites in Milkman, an earnestness to discover his roots and lineage. Now, he identifies himself with Solomon, his flying ancestor. His lifelong fascination about flight has turned out to be a tangible legacy of his ancestors. However, his identification with his flying ancestor also points to a contrast. Unlike Solomon whose flight to freedom meant an abandonment of his family and community, Milkman discovers flight through his integration into his community and lineage. The abandonment of alienation and connection to his heritage enables him to know and define himself.

Milkman returns home, a changed person and brings Pilate back to the cliff known as Solomon's Leap where they bury her father's bones which she has always carried with her. Sadly, Pilate is fatally wounded by Guitar's bullet intended for Milkman. In her final moments, Milkman sings the song of Pilate but his own version addresses "O Sugar girl – done fly away."(340). He laments for Pilate who have guided him in his quest for his truth. Pilate dies, regretting only, her inability to love more people. The novel ends as a tearful Milkman rises and takes a sudden leap towards Guitar, not in anger but addressing him as a brother and offering him his life, "Here I am!...You want me? Huh? You want my life?..."(337).

Morrison's novel ends on a note of ambiguity raising the question whether Milkman dies or not. However, what signifies greater importance is the fact that the story hinges on Milkman's achievement of the knowledge of an encompassing love that recognizes the primacy of community and fellow-feeling against which the issues of death or survival become irrelevant.

The story may be interpreted as a *bildungsroman* in that it traces the spiritual growth of the protagonist and his evolution in the course of his journey to self-discovery. The novel inverts the conventional western initiation pattern. Whereas the classical American protagonist transcends his social limitations to achieve his independent and individualistic self, Morrison patterns a different initiation story in depicting the protagonist's quest for his personal and racial identity in the context of his African ancestry and community. While Morrison honors the black man's undaunted spirit of freedom and adventure, her critical tone is unmistakable because "there's a price to pay-the price is the children. The fathers may soar, they may triumph, they may leave, but the children ... remember, half in glory and half accusation."(Guthrie46).

Morrison celebrates the black women whose lives stand testimony to a struggle with responsibilities and burdens for their individual and collective survival. Contrary to the "fraudulent freedom of their men, black women seem to combine the "nest and adventure," becoming "both safe and harbor and ship; they are both inn and trail, we black women, do both" (114).Thus Morrison depicts the character of Pilate as a representation of a powerful cultural and communal connection. Self-born from a dead mother and without a navel, she is ostracized by her own black people. Her isolation brings her great hardships and deprivations. At length "she threw away every assumption she learned and began at Zero" (149). She cuts off her hair and struggles to survive and build a family single-handedly. She is the embodiment of strength, self-creation and determination. Her simple life characterized by spontaneity and freedom contrasts with the constricting materialism of Macon. This woman "looked like a tall, black tree" and signifies the elemental essence of black American culture and womanhood (39).The dark, fruity, joyful and the musical ambience of her home points to the life affirming aspects of black life which nurtures Milkman. At one point in the story, we learn how Macon, once passing by Pilate's house, is irresistibly drawn to the enthralling music made by the three women inside which stirs up his dead spirit.While the society shuns her, she "has a deep concern for and about human relationships" (149). She instructs Milkman about the mysterious and spiritual aspect of blackness. She initiates Milkman into African American values as a way for his moral and spiritual regeneration.

In contrast to Pilate's character, other female characters in the novel are defined by their inability to achieve an authentic black self, such as Ruth Foster Dead, Hagar, Lena and Corianthians. Ruth Foster's father is the first black doctor in the black community of Michigan. Ruth also inherits the black bourgeois attitude of considering herself superior to the less privileged members of her community. Growing up withdrawn and lonely, her father becomes the sole provider of love and care for her which becomes the reason for her strong relationship with him. After her marriage to the black capitalist Macon, Ruth's deep and somewhat perverted attachment to her father greatly affects her marital life. Macon charges her of having incestuous relationship with her father who delivered her two daughters and besides whose corpse she had laid and kissed the fingers. His contempt for her becomes a constant factor for the deprivation of love and sexual fulfillment in her marriage. In a bid to save her marriage she undergoes great hardships and with the help of Macon's resourceful sister Pilate, bears him a son but it was all in vain. A tortured soul, Ruth silently seeks a refuge for her emotional and physical deprivation by suckling her son even after he is four years old and visiting the grave of her father. The water mark on the mahogany table signifies her unfulfilled sorrowful life. Just as the vase of flowers is no longer present and leaves only its mark on the table where it stood, there exists only a haunting memory of her happy past with her father. "She becomes imprisoned in the circle of the past without any contact with the world outside or a hopeful perspective for her freedom" (Mori128). It also symbolizes her repressed existence under the oppressive control of her husband who lives only for his materialistic values. Hagar is another example of a character victimized by the dominant white values. Although Pilate is able to affirm her black identity, she fails to nurture those black

values in her grandchild Hagar. Hagar is one of those young women who are infatuated by the myth of romantic love. Once she becomes Milkman's lover, she immerses herself so completely in his love that she sees no other purpose in her life than to be loved. In fact, "her love denies any sense of self worth" (Carmean57).After Milkman rejects her love, she assumes her blackness to be the cause of her misery. Her mirror confirms her blackness and ugliness "Look at how I look. I look awful. No wonder he didn't want me. I look terrible" (Morrison 309). She goes on a day long and passionate shopping mission in order to achieve the promise of beauty by the white commodity culture. Unfortunately, the downpour washes away all her artificial make up and ruins her expensive dresses. It signifies the futility of such efforts to construct a false identity. Her death highlights the self-destruction that the pursuit of such an unattainable self-definition brings to the black woman.

It is later in the wilderness of Shalimar where he sheds away his civilized self and comes to discover the truth of human life that Milkman realizes his ruthless insensitivity to Hagar's love and accepts his guilt. The box containing Hagar's hair which he would always carry with him like Pilate's bag of bones becomes a reminder of the burden and reaffirmation of his past. Eventually, Milkman achieves his true freedom. The reinterpretation of his name 'Milkman' gives him a new identity. His name represents both milk, a female source of nourishment and the male spirit of freedom. Morrison expresses this idea explicitly to Anne Koenan:

I want him to learn how to surrender, and to dominate
–domination and surrender…women already know
That surrender part, and can easily learn how to dominate …
But what I wanted was a character who had everything to learn … (Guthrie75-76).

CONCLUSION:

As Cynthia Davis observes on the meaning of Milkman's flight, "only in the recognition of his condition can he act in it, only in commitment is he free"(Draper221).Morrison states in the epigraph "The fathers may soar/And the children may know their names". It emphasizes the exigency for a synthesis of the spirit of those fathers who flew to freedom with those of their children who have to shoulder the responsibility of keeping their names and stories alive. Valerie Smith appropriately observes "Milkman bursts the bonds of the Western, individualistic conception of self, accepting in its place the richness and complexity of a collective sense of identity" (Review 145).To sum up, *Song of Solomon* is a beautiful quest story of a black man who discovers the need to transcend the isolating concept of the western individualism and affirm those collectivist ethos rooted in a shared past, struggle and survival for the achievement of an authentic black identity.

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