

The Unable-To-Be-Made-White Black Soul --The Presentation of Black Cultural Value in *Song of Solomon*

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ABSTRACT

The self-quest of black people is vividly described in Toni Morrison's major novel *Song of Solomon*, in which the confusion of identity and the desire for recognition is deeply analysed under the racial and gender discrimination in American society. Focusing on exploring the influence of dominant culture and defending black American culture, the paper probes Milkman's characters and life experiences, and displays the insights into hardships when black people are making every effort to pursue their self-identity and recognition, and echoes Morrison's topical concern and artistic creation.

Keywords: *self-quest, confusion, gender discrimination, self-identity*

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, as an increasing number of critics and readers attach more attention to the African American literature and also with the great fame Toni Morrison got during the last decade, we have sound reasons to look into her novels and pursue the deeper cultural meaning underlying the surface.

Toni Morrison in one of her major novels *Song of Solomon* presented us a full picture of cultural conflict between the white and the black. Adopting a cultural view to analyse those major characters and classic themes in this novel, this paper intends to reveal such a truth: in the white-dominant society, only black themselves can inherit ethical cultural value and can survive healthily, while conversely, if they look down upon their own cultural value, they are doomed with self-destruction.

2. THE RESISTANCE IN CULTURAL CONFLICT

Toni Morrison creatively combine the realism and fantasy together in her novels which has attracted both popular and critical attention. The blend of social observation with broadening and allusive comments features her fictions as the symbolic quality of myth, and in fact the search for a myth adequate to experience is one of Morrison's central themes. Because her world and characters are inescapably involved with problems of perception, definition, and meaning, they direct attention to Morrison's own ordering view and its implications. Morrison tries to put all her characters in a world defined by its blackness. The white society exerts its destructive effect

to show a frustrating form of outright physical violence, but Morrison's world is more often psychic violence and oppression. She rarely depicts white characters, for the brutality here is less a single act than the systematic denial of the reality of black lives. The theme of invisibility is, of course, a common one in black American literature, but Morrison avoids the picture of the black person "invisibility" in white life. Instead, she immerses the reader in the black community; the white society's ignorance of that concrete, vivid, and diverse world is thus even more striking. In *Song of Solomon*—Toni Morrison has earned a reputation as a gifted storyteller and masterful stylist who has created haunting images of humans isolated by their failures in love and their problems with identity. It is Toni Morrison's major fiction which shows her deep concern with the Afro-American's fate. She goes beyond the traditional black literature topic which envies or hates the white and undoubtedly begins a more open abstract expression.

3. THE CLASSICAL MYTH

Roger Rosenblatt has remarked that much Afro-American fiction tends toward myth because of its "acknowledgement of external limitation and the anticipation of it" [1]. However, western myth "transforms acceptance of blackness as identity into acceptance of blackness for the self-definition of folklore" [2] This question is obviously crucial for Morrison, whose fictions try to combine existential concerns compatible with a mythic presentation with an analysis of American society. White brutality and insensitivity are part of the environment the black characters must struggle with, but they are most often conditions, institutionalized and often anonymous, rather than events with ritualistic overtones.

In the *Song of Solomon*, she not only probes into black women breaking away from the white society to create individualistic lives for themselves, but also deals with the black men yearning to fly and break out of the defining life into the realm of possibility. But whether or not the hero, Milkman, as he is nicknamed, will continue to ride the air or die at the hands of his former black friend is unresolved. However, this question, posed at the end for the reader, throws in sharper focus the themes which the writer carries over from her previous books: flight, the journey, family, friendship, violence, the paradox of good and evil, the world of black society: its code, superstitions, plus fable, song, and myth.

The achievement of this novel is its willingness and ability not only to explore these areas in further detail, but to use black folklore, the ready acceptance of the supernatural, and magic as part of black culture.

3.1 The Heroic Quest

What we have in *Song of Solomon*, with Milkman's story, is that constant in American literature—the undertaking of the journey to free oneself. In *Song of Solomon* the quest is explicitly rather than implicitly for a name. Milkman Dead, a central character with very conventional values, comes to a point at which he feels the need to find out his family's true name. The discovery of this name carries with it a sense of his own humanity and also certain magical qualities connected with black folklore. In African cultures, the name is the conveying of the soul; therefore, choosing a name and keep it for himself is a major ritual to respect culture and tradition. To lose the name or, in African American terms, to be “called out of one's name” [3] is an offense against the spirit.

Consistent with these folk beliefs, the Dead family, whose name were given to them accidentally after the Civil War by a drunken white soldier, act out the designation. Macon Dead as the father of this family has perverted his efforts to acquire and work the land to become an exploitative landlord and real estate speculator. He defines himself and others by accumulation of alienated property. Milkman's mother, Ruth, rejects the present by literally embracing only the past and the future. Macon tells the story of seeing her lying naked on the bed with her father's corpse. And Milkman acquired his nickname by being discovered still nursing at his mother's breast when he was four years old. Ruth, as the daughter of the town's first black doctor, displays the values of the old black bourgeoisie by assuming an attitude of hauteur toward her nouveau riche husband. Their daughters, Magdalene and First Corinthians (whose names were selected by the family tradition of choosing names at random from The Bible), as adult virgins, have never been given the permission to experience love, because for one thing that all men in the community are socially beneath them and for the other that the men were not wealthy enough. Milkman's friend Guitar joining in the Seven Days, a secret society advocated by the black men to exact retribution for the deaths of blacks killed by whites. The murder of a black child must be avenged by the similar death of a white one on the same day of his week.

Milkman, then, is born and raised in a family which is life-denying. When he is born, a man happens to leap from the roof of the hospital, seemingly to show as a sign of frustration. As he grows up, he gradually acquires the attitudes of his family and friends and finally completes the heroic mission. Morrison makes his status clear by depicting him in clearly mythic terms. Milkman's life typically follows the pattern of the classic hero, from miraculous birth through quest-journey to a final reunion with his double. And Milkman largely resolves the conflict between freedom and connection. At first the familiar cold hero, he comes to ask the cost of the heroic quest—“who'd he leave behind?” [3] He learns not only that the hero serves a function for society, the exploration of limits it cannot reach but also that it serves him: his great-grandfather Shalimar left his children, but “it was the children who sang about it and kept the story of his leaving alive” [3]. More, he finds that his quest is his cultures; he can only discover what he is by discovering what his family is. By undertaking the quest, he combines subjective freedom with objective fact and defines himself in both spheres.

Milkman's journey through Pennsylvania and Virginia can be regarded, in many places, as in the tradition of the picaresque, in which each episode brings the protagonist into contact with some aspect of black society. But in fact, it can more profitably be examined as a journey in which each place becomes a test of character and soul, with the results that the hero grows in understanding as he learns bits of family history and starts piecing it together. History becomes a choral symphony to Milkman, in which each individual voice has a chance to speak and contribute to his growing sense of well-being.

The pattern is something like this. In Reverend Cooper's parsonage, Milkman hears that it was right in this room that Pilate's snuff bow was soldered. The information makes him feel real. He also learns more details about his grandfather's murder, as well as the fact that the killers were never brought to justice. It forces him to think about justice and injustice, something that as the son of a prosperous black man he has not had much occasion to do [3].

His next step is to survey the acres which his grandfather cleared single-handed, and which are now as overgrown as his grandfather found them. The sight arouses his admiration and pride in his ancestor and he feels diminished because of the life he has led personally. Later, attacked by black men, he realizes that the flaunting of his prosperity (well-cut suit, expensive luggage good Scotch) is an affront to those less fortunate than he. Finally, faced with the unknown when he goes on a hunting expedition with older black men, he proves his manhood and achieves harmony with nature and man in the forest.

3.2 A Female Guide Figure—Pilate

Many of Morrison's characters believe in the capacity of the mind to see through the chinks of the cavern—even the money-hungry and materialistic Macon Dead. But it is Macon's sister Pilate who emerges as the most powerful figure in the book with her calm acceptance of this world, as well as of another reality other than the fixed one of the worlds. She is thoroughly at home with herself, and has the

kind of sensibility which is not disturbed by anything she experiences or witnesses. There is something splendidly pagan and primitive about her, and she is represented at the time we first meet her as having the power to evoke from others various reflections of her own kindness and understanding. Implicitly, the author establishes Pilate's capacity for pacing herself in harmony with the laws of the earth and nature. Within the orbit of Morrison's moral vision, these laws have to do with the truths of the human heart. They are the necessity to demonstrate courage, endurance, sympathy, and desire to help others, while surviving with dignity.

The story of Pilate is part of a black family history which spans almost a century of American history. It is given special enrichment through the tracing of many lives. More notably, it forms a fascinating parallel with the odyssey of her nephew milkman, who is the other chief character in the story. The fullness of the book even incorporates within it an ironic twist on the Faulknerian theme: the collapse of a proud, white Southern family, and the faithful black retainer who continues to serve with humility and devotion. Braided in with the lives of the black people is also a brief story of the decline of a white family whose men killed Pilate's father... The dominant motif in the book, however, is not revenge, but the proud realization by a black family of who and what they are. Morrison's fiction is the opposite of Richard Wright's in this respect. Where Wright finds no sustaining values in the past black people. Morrison celebrates the past. Pilate, Macon, and milkman, whose last name is Dead, did not just drop from nowhere. They go back to a long line of succession. There was a beginning. A source. It is this knowledge which gives them a sense of renewal; even Macon experiences renewal in a small way [3].

The design of the book is sprawling and the narrative texture depends on a great many cumulative effects. Together with the author's allusions and indirect use of archetypal patterns about Pilate, she never lets us lose sight of the fact that Pilate is a woman grounded firmly in the social reality of black society. Pilate's twenty-year odyssey and her subsequent life in the small town in which she finally settles not far from her brother (to his rage, embarrassment and shame over her unconventional life), enables the author to move further than in the previous novel in her discussion of black society and women—married and unmarried.

The young Pilate, alone and completely dependent on her own resources, cannot find acceptance. Her life takes on a habitual pattern. She is either asked to leave the community, or she is deserted by these people who simply disappear during the night, since they are migrant workers. Pilate, however, resists any "sense of permanent personal displacement" [3].

The writer is careful not to make Pilate into a romantic pantheist. Hence, we see Pilate appraising her situation, the social scene, and debating the means of personal salvation available to her. She does this with no semblance of self-pity, sentiment, and brooding introspection. Like Sula, she decides to take "the free fall", but in a different way.

She rejects the traditional image of woman by cutting off her hair, binding it into a turban and wearing clothes functional to her way of life. With two people now to support (daughter and granddaughter), she looks around the social scene, and realizing that throats are thirsty as long as there is prohibition, she becomes a bootlegger, making and selling wine and whiskey. The author stresses that Pilate never loses her humanity, nor debases her and other women by allowing traffic in women flesh. She only sells wine and whiskey. There is no consumption on the premises. Thus, Pilate soon enjoys that status too difficult for black women (and white women) to acquire—economic independence. As an economically-independent woman, she is able to function outside of patriarchal values and rise successfully above the social forces which are a constant threat to the black woman.

Interestingly enough, while Morrison presents women who eventually free themselves somehow from an unnatural life, Pilate's daughter and granddaughter are portrayed differently. Although leading a natural life in some respects, they are essentially weak women.

Ironically, Pilate, who is able to break out of the enclosures of conventional thinking and make a brave and happy life for her, cannot inspire either woman in her house to follow her example. The author tries to get around it by hinting that Reba is somewhat simple-minded, and that Hagar is one of those pretty, spoiled black women who either want to kill or die for love. Perhaps the more plausible answer is that Pilate exercises individual will, whereas the others simply do not.

The explorations of the lives of these women reveal a growth in the author's feminist consciousness not present in the previous novel. Alternatives are possible, says the author, and in the character of Pilate she creates a woman finds life worth living and lives it. Perhaps, Toni Morrison would not care to be discussed in terms of feminist consciousness, but the fact remains that her depiction of Pilate stresses that Pilate's pattern of living does not follow the achievement pattern associated with successful men. Pilate is always the humanist. The order of things is questioned and judged not only from social and moral viewpoints, but also from the metaphysical. If Pilate is not accepted by kin and society, she is very much at home with her dead father, who appears before her periodically with advice. One piece of advice is to go back to the cave and collect the bones of the dead man, which she does. It makes for the extraordinary ending to the book: for the bones are really those of her father. Their proper burial adds a note of the classic to the details of family history.

Life and death, then, hold no terrors for Pilate, whose sense of contact with this and other worlds is a natural one. She is able to survive in a society which denies her "partnership in marriage, confessional friendship, and communal religion." The author concludes her tribute to Pilate by commenting that Pilate makes a life for herself in which for sixty-eight years she has shed no tears since the day Circe offered her white bread and store-bought jam. In return for rudeness, she extends politeness, and her concern for troubled people ripens with the years. Yet for some reason, as in *Sula*, the woman who dares to live by her own rules must die. True, Pilate doesn't disappear from life at the early age that Sula does, but she is rendered with such loving

detail that her death from the shot of a black killer comes as a shock to the reader.

4. CONCLUSION

Toni Morrison consciously claims that she writes the black text, or the village literature, and defines herself as “valuable as a black woman writer”, because “woman have some special knowledge about certain things” [4] Being black and female, in her sense, is to have privileged insights and emotions. She presents a well-polished mirror to the sufferings and special strength of black people from her very marginality as a single black herself.

In her fiction, Toni Morrison has united her theme, the explorations of love in the double-folded oppressed society, and a traditional device, the initiation motif, along with a series of brilliantly dramatized foreshadowing events, skilfully make frames, and splendid characterizations, the resulting novels are compelling statements of the failure of black people’s pursuit of true human values. The inversion of a traditional motif is successful, and its effect is devastating. Through her writing, Morrison allows her characters to seek their sense of identity by way of the black experience and lifestyle. The road to self-discovery is both a product of Morrison’s imagination and Morrison’s own life experience [5]. Morrison creates her characters in such a way that they represent both the best and worst of human nature. Her protagonists are neither all good nor all bad, and they are multifaceted and driven by a variety of life experiences. In her fiction, she attempts to show the prevailing differences that exist among blacks as well as the commonalities that bind them together as a race.

Morrison takes as ordinary experience what more realistic black writers assume to be fantastic. She differs from other writers in taking for granted that what is considered irrational is in fact only a perversion of the natural order by a mechanistic, oppressive social system. Thus, for the author of these three novels, the sight of the blind, magical power of the important, and the spiritual vitality of nonhuman nature makes greater sense than the insanities, grotesqueries, and ironies of the realm of “normality” and order. The particular dialectical structure of her work serves to develop the interrelated irrationalities of black cultural value.

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