

The Search for Selfhood Amid Trauma and Culturally Divided World in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*

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Abstract:

Toni Morrison's magnum opus, *Song of Solomon* has enlightened readers to the core, wherein she deals with an insight of the fictional artist that gained from examining the experiences of a richly layered meditation on elements such as identity, ancestry, and the enduring power of memory. The novel divulges how the past is never truly past, rather it is carried forward to create the structure the present, amalgamating generations by the means of stories, silences, and inherited legacies. With this background of these remarkable elements, what became ostensible was a deeper quest for selfhood amid the two divided world of trauma and culture. Milkman Dead, a restless young man who searches for a sense of self and in the process of this exploration he transforms into a quest for self-discovery. Establishing the specified objectives of the hidden pathways of his family history, he reveals forgotten narratives, ancestral truths, and cultural inheritance that redefine his understanding of self-determination, belonging, and selfhood. With the means of literature, it is more often than not the influential trend in the cultural background of Morrison's writings as the main idea of this work of literature. This establishment serves as a provocative matter in itself since Morrison's novels have often been read—and even sometimes simplified—under this approach. The purpose of this study lies in establishing the importance of individual subjectivity in the novel. In order to fulfil this purpose, one has to consider the relevant features in this novel that are meticulously scrutinised and accomplished from multiple perspectives. In order to have a comprehensive understanding, one has to relate with critical and theoretical approaches in the study that clarify the process.

Keywords: Selfhood, Trauma, Culture, Emancipation, History, Inheritance

Introduction

Song of Solomon, Morrison's richest novel, grows out of this dialectic between the possibilities of space and the securities of place. What is unique about the book is its refusal to simplistically resolve the matter. Space and place are options for her characters, some of whom use these options well and others of whom use them. (Butler 63)

The opening quote serves as a succinct notion about Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977), which became incredibly prosperous for its "uniqueness." Morrison is one of the most inspiring Afro-American writers who have enlightened readers to the core. The above mentioned comments were made by Robert James Butler in a *Jstor* article entitled, "Open Movement and Selfhood in Toni Morrison's *"Song of Solomon"*" (1985) highpoints the distinctive nature of the novel that centres on twofold elements such as space and place. Morrison's *Song of Solomon* is considered as the most celebrated and tentatively titled as "*Milkman Dead*" explores the theme of African American identity, history, and cultural consciousness. The novel elucidates the uniqueness of Morrison's artistry and also explains her rational renovation that progresses from the denunciation of socialism, a rejection that climaxes in her distinctive style as seen in her work. However, her chief apprehension is more precisely human's quest for self-knowledge. Morrison's creative quality has always distinctively mingled with the facts gathered from her life. Her personal life experience has always been associated with her fictional work that closely parallels her characters.

There are multiple levels where and when the flight operates in the novel. The novel begins with flying and ends with the same imagery: Robert Smith fatally leaped from the roof, and Milkman did the same in the final scene. The Smiths' flight represents the Black Americans' historical segregation and diasporic fate of entrapment (Morrison 9-12). The nickname 'Milkman' given to Macon Dead III alludes to the childhood episodes of his lifted flight, even though the peacock and aviary imagery shows that excess baggage, material or psychological crisis, weighs down the flight. Which was Milkman's craved escape being evident. Most notably, there is a scene in which Milkman, who is in the process of learning about flight, thinks that "...only birds and airplanes could fly...lost all interest in himself." As Morrison stated:

"cy-baby tippy

Suck he mamma's nippy..." as Porter (43) expressed.

"Sugarman done fly away

Sugarman done gone

Sugarman cut across the sky

Sugarman gone home." (Morrison 6).

This is the Pilates' song that manifested in the *Song of Solomon* as a central thematic and symbolic association of the old man's departure as flight and freedom from alienation, as we will see how all this alienation and escape were in the form of death as this song

implicated or reconnection to one's heritage while running from the pain each character was engulfed.

After a while, he comes to understand that flight is not only a physical escape but also a means of self-realization. Milkman senses his heritage when Guitar celebrates the legend of Solomon's flight- "my great-granddaddy could flyyyyyy, and the whole damn town is named after him" as a manifestation of taking flight as a freedom and power (Morrison 530). In this context, with all this in mind, Milkman's final flight represents freedom, liberation, and spiritual transcendence.

In *Song of Solomon*, showcases enduring commitment to preserving the richness of Black life and scrutinising its multifaceted relationship with the prevailing white social order. The novel takes the readers to through narrative that profoundly embedded in factors such as memory, ancestry, and folklore, illuminating how the persistent legacy of slavery continues to mould the experience, aspirations and individualities of African Americans.

Pursuing the social and discursive implication to reality, Morrison explored the multifaceted sentiments of expression of grief that precisely reflected the socio-political crisis, which leads eventually to the question that threatened the very future of humanity. This novel also opens up the concept of prediction and its significances as an investigation that exhumes some of the interactions between many thematic preoccupations of the socio-political crisis.

While dealing with Morrison's oeuvre, one can notice elements such as race, class, and gender oppression play an important role and have also left a deep impact on the lives of black; they endeavoured to eradicate these numerous customs of discriminations that they and their communities face. Her work becomes an epitome of cultural retrieval, healing voices and histories that have long been downgraded. Taking into consideration the recounting past, Morrison develops it into a firm sense of force that shapes her characters towards self-discovery and collective healing.

A truly constructive approach, an optimal that would cover all the issues affected all individuals, such battering, are made by racial identity, societal status, and sexual orientation as well as by gender. Morrison's untiring perseverance to rejoice black cultural heritage and divulging the psychological and historical significances of racial oppression establishes her as one of the most influential literary voices of African American experience.

Song of Solomon is a splendid novel with epic prospect, enlighten by an exceptional gallery of characters who lives unfolds through adventure, memory and myth. Milkman Dead plays a significant role in the novel, his transformative expedition as the protagonist. His transformative journey across landscape became a symbolic quest for identity, ancestry, and spiritual emerging. His life has been established and reviewed by the paths of his forebears;

he discloses the history of three generations of his family, culminating in the legendary figure of Solomon (Shalimar), who rises above the ruthless confines of slavery by taking flight from Solomon's dive in Virginia and returning to African. As mentioned by Joyce Ann Joyce:

Although Milkman is the protagonist of *Song of Solomon*, he alone does not function as the structural center which unites the characters and explains the novel's configuration. Rather, Pilate, Milkman's aunt, functions as the thread that continuously unifies the parts of the novel and provides the key to our understanding the change in Milkman's emotional development. Unless the reader understands Pilate's relationship to Milkman, he/she will be unable to perceive the novel's artistic unity. (Joyce 186)

Predominantly, conferring with a broad outline of the novel, one can indispensably study the various aspects of his life. Taking him into consideration, one can say that this ancestral legend develops the mythic foundation of Milkman's expedition towards selfhood. One of the developing factors about this phase is his understanding of the universality of human misery as well as the complexity of his abhorrence. In this context, referring to the words of Ann E. Imbrie, who highpoints:

Milkman Dead travels from this world back to Shalimar, Virginia, a simpler, more primitive and "natural" world, where he is educated in a new way, in lessons the city cannot teach him. We see the results of his education when he returns to the city, if not entirely a new person, at least sufficiently changed to understand and accept his human responsibility. (Imbrie 477)

A through the reading of the novel divulges that the novel is full of rich tapestry of interlocking relationships, unfulfilled desires, rivalries and enduing affections. Multiple factors such as love and loss, violence and redemption, compassion and jealousy coverage in ever-shifting patterns, creating a kaleidoscopic vision of human experience masterfully weaves. Every aspect and also the character contribute to this convoluted strategy, showcasing the cultural, sensitive and historical challenges of African American lives.

With these above-mentioned circumstances in the contextual background, the most captivating divergences are the siblings Macon Dead II and Pilate Dead in the novel. By presenting the character of Macon, Morrison interprets him as corrosive power of materialism without individuality or a supporting inner life. She comprehends that his control lies in wealth, property, and social status that are the only consistent foundations of esteem and safekeeping. His definition of success is associated with ownership and economic power that functions as a distinctive and staunch resolution and pursues him to pledge with bravery, self-assurance, and morality that he recreates his life and redeems his confidence in societal development through his economic power.

By considering the above discussed qualities, this point to be noticed in the character of Pilate, in this critical discourse, exhibits striking opposition, rejects material possessions in favour of generosity, love, and spiritual wisdom characteristically. Her life signifies the ancestral memory and communal value, wherein she represents a life lead by compassion rather than greed. They are immensely contrary to each other and stand as symbolic factors conflicting worldviews illuminating the novel's central tension between material wealth and spiritual inheritance.

At the end of the book, Milkman "finds his lost connection with his ancestors as he acknowledges his connection with his contemporaries; he finds community through community" (Morrison 337). Despite his achievement of connecting himself to his ancestors, the novel also has room for paradox. Even though Milkman has a quest that unites him with Kin, it ultimately isolates him through his final, daring flight alone. This suggests that Morrison depicts identity that arises from reclaiming one's roots while transcending individual social constraints.

When the ideas of family, race, and history are considered as thematic assets of the novel, the Dead (a given name by mistake) family saga is situated by the author as a broader sweep of African-American history. Even though the novel is set in the early 1960s, at a time when the Civil Rights movement was a great deal, its action ignores the possible connection between the family's story and the mainstream politics of the time. Despite the very critical movement of civil rights for Black Americans, Morrison focused on the everyday lives of the Dead family, their experience of folklore, family lore, and ancestral mythic memories, which showed how ordinary Black lives sustained the Black liberation movements (Blake 80).

Conclusion

Realities amalgamate with mind's eye to produce the object of literature; Morrison accomplishes to nurture the progress of individual consciousness to overwhelm the prescriptions related to culture. Through the masterpiece, *Song of Solomon*, the study prospects a critical and profound engagement, drawing alongside a range of scholarly viewpoints to scrutinise the richness and intricacies of Morrison's narrative vision.

In any critical assessment of Morrison's celebrated oeuvre, *Song of Solomon*, one can say that there is a profound exploration of the individual's quest for self-determination within the intertwined historical, racial, cultural, social-political, and economic realities of African American life. She shapes the foundation that basically focused on the history and experience of the black people in her fictional world. Even though individualistically perceived, Morrison's views were remarkably turn around the Southern black family, the transcendent existence of the black community, the violence towards them is the chief focus of her projection. One can notice that "Most critics writing about *Song of Solomon* incorrectly see a positive ending to the novel in which Milkman's triumph stands for more

than just his individual transcendence; they see his immersion into folk myth and ambience as having practical implications for the uplift of the Black community in general.”(Coleman 151)

Another perspective on the issue of social structures and racial prejudices in society make sense of historical processes by enlightening the relationship between the human subject and the objective world. Thus, embodied knowledge of the structures of reality has made norms that would seem to be justified. It is always the individuals who make up the society and for this reason; it is valuable to explore their minds to get a better picture of the social issues. Moreover, the process of this investigation is often entirely rational. Morrison, being an active agent associates these factors to create her kinds of literature.

In quite a realistic way, the analysis of the novel centres on the search of individuality, the spirituality and rituality of manhood, theme of alienation, ancestral inheritance, magical realism, folklore, myth, and the safeguarding of communal and historical memory. The novel regulates with the healing power of creation that has been considered by many critics to be her best and the most influential work. It has spawned numerous guides and companions. Morrison, as a revolutionary writer of her age, intricately weaves the above-mentioned themes into a narrative wherein individuality and heritage emerge as both lived history and ideological cognizance. Morrison, in an interview with Christina Davis, mentions:

Yes, the reclamation of the history of black people in this country is paramount in its importance because while you can't really blame the conqueror for writing history his own way, you can certainly debate it. There's a great deal of obfuscation and distortion and erasure, so that the presence and the heartbeat of black people has been systematically annihilated in many, many ways and the job of recovery is ours. (Morrison 142)

To consolidate this reading, and to ensure that her understanding with sufficient depth, may be motivated to write and has broadened the horizon showing how the field has been developing and what the current challenges and problems are. Her evolutionary treatment of the Black people distinguishes Morrison as a supporter and chronicler for them. She perceives the understandings of the Blacks as a sequence of arrangements from people completely mistreated by society and by the own problems in their lives. Her works endeavour to an emphasis on the concerns of the oppression of African American Black people in the white society.

Taking through the figurative significance of names, the evocative use of myths and rituals, and the resilient manifestation of ancestral memory, *Song of Solomon* enlighten the African American experience of the 1960s, illuminating how the reclamation of the past becomes a crucial act of cultural endurance, self-determination, and liberation. Morrison's manifestation echoes the participation of the enduring struggle of black and minority; she wishes to bring progressive changes in the lives of the Black people. With the help of her writing, she endeavours to offer integrity to the Black community.

In this analysis, *Song of Solomon* and other scholarly writings have been reviewed and critiqued on the mentioned novel. Morrison's widely acclaimed examination of the individual search for self-knowledge in the African-American historical, cultural, racial, socio-political, and economic contexts. Also in this analysis, the dominant themes of the novel are self-identity, the spirituality and rituals of manhood, alienation, ancestral heritage, magical realism, folklore, myth, and communal and historical memories. This search for identity and heritage has been represented both as an ideology and history; names, symbols, and rituals are incorporated with the context of the African-American experience of the 1960s.

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