

The Quest for Authenticity and Cultural Identity: A Study of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*

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Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* presents a family's history, which invariably reflects the collective history of the Afro-Americans. This sequential story revolves around Milkman Dead and his unwitting spiritual and physical journey to his ancestral home. Marc C. Conner points out that finding home is not, as Milkman believes, "a simple matter of geography" but that "his communal identity must be *earned*; that is, Milkman must undergo his own harrowing—in the older sense of being torn, lacerated, cut through—in order to find who he is and where he has come from" (60). Milkman commences his life with a very low level of awareness about the triptych of race, class and gender. Such ignorance leads to an absence of self-awareness, which deters his journey towards his identity. His self-realization is hampered by his embrace of the materialistic and acquisitive philosophy that he imbibed from his father. When he gives up money-oriented thinking, his conscience rises to a higher level and begins to commingle with African masses. This novel, as Marilyn Sander Mobley states, is "essentially the story of Milkman Dead's search of discovery of meaning in his life" ("Myth as Usable Past" 97). It is the story of Milkman's search for his roots. He initiates a journey to the "mythic past" (Spallino 511). Milkman's journey is crowned with the sprouting of his spiritual identity, connecting him to the past incorporating him to present and peering him to the pinnacle of self-discovery.

Milkman's search for identity does involve racial conflict, social transition and communal values. However, on the most basic level, his search for identity is intertwined with family and domestic values. Philip M. Royster notes that the development of Milkman's identity "is depicted by a series of episodes during which he discovers his relationship to his family" (419). He begins his journey toward a self-knowledge that will be earned through an understanding of family relationships and his heritage. As Mobley argues, "*Song of Solomon* invites us to remember the expensive price of freedom and the struggle the descendents of enslaved Africans had to wage to obtain what racial identity once denied" ("Politics of Representation" 212).

Milkman's father, Macon Dead, believes that acquisition of wealth will put him on par with the white race. This can be seen in the way "he behaves like a white man, thinks like a white man" (*Song of Solomon* 223). According to Susan Willis, Macon Dead's attitudes toward rent and property make him more white than black (34). His desire for wealth is his vision of a freedom quest. He chooses to believe what he shares with his son, Milkman, "Money is freedom, Macon. The only real freedom there is" (*Song of Solomon* 163). His inordinate craze for possession pervades Milkman's mind but at the end he realizes that materialism is a hindrance that prevents him from constructing his identity. Macon is as the "tyrant-monster" of Morrison's literary myth. It is much more unnerving to recognize how his ambition, his concern with image and his insistence that his son steer clear of lower classes reflect a value system that dominates our culture (Coontz 1992). Everything about Macon establishes him as Morrison's "modern" man. He is materialistic, isolated, alienated and always looking to the future.

The series of rejections Pilate faced by the Afro-American community shortly after her brother's (Macon's) desertion and her father's murder could easily have allowed her to become bitter, hostile, angry or even deranged, in her isolation. Although she did "finally . . . take

offense,” she did not level vitriol at those who hurt her, instead she took the time to “decide how she wanted to live and what was valuable to her,” choosing to extend merciful love (*Song of Solomon* 149).

Pilate unlike any of the other characters in the book, bases her decision on how she wants to live her life with a focus solely on the Afro-American community. Basing her pattern for behavior on the kind care she had been given “by [her] father . . . brother” and Circe, Pilate chooses to value “a deep concern for and about human relationships” (*Song of Solomon* 149). Pilate determines to love others, treating each one with respect and concern. Her home is open to anyone in need as a haven for rest, refreshment of the spirit or shelter. It is, as Cheryl A. Wall asserts, “a utopian alternative” (25). Pilate demonstrates merciful love to all who enter her door or with whom she comes in contact. She is, in fact, the epitome of love in Morrison’s novel.

When Pilate sings the old blues song “Sugarman, Don’t Leave Me Here,” she sings with an understanding of loss and sorrow, separation and love. No matter where she has traveled or where she sets up her household, Pilate carries the family’s heritage with her. She keeps the name her father gave her in a brass earring and the story of her family in her heart.

Macon is afraid that his son might imbibe Pilate’s impractical philosophy. So he warns him “Pilate can’t teach you a thing in this world. May be the next, but not this one. Let me tell you right now the one important thing you’ll ever need to know: Own things. And let the things you own, own other things. Then you’ll own yourself and other people too” (*Song of Solomon* 55).

Milkman considers his name a source of shame. J. Brooks Bouson connects Milkman’s rejection of his name to a broader rejection of his race, gender and heritage, describing him as “a shame-ridden individual who carries with him the ‘shit’ not only of his family’s false class pride but also of inherited familial and racial shame” (75). But his contact with Pilate totally changes him: “Now he was behaving with this strange woman as though having the name was a matter of deep personal pride, as though she has tried to expel him from a very special group, in which he not only belonged, but had exclusive rights” (*Song of Solomon* 39). It is Pilate who nourishes his mind with some stories of her childhood, of his father, of his grandmother and of his grandfather who has been murdered; such stories awake his consciousness about his family’s past. She showers love on him. Wallowing in it, he tells for the “first time in his life that he remembered being completely happy” (Plakkootom 85).

When Macon convinces Milkman that Pilate’s green tarpaulin bag contains gold apparently stolen fifty years earlier, he and Guitar stealthily enter her home to steal it. Although Pilate would have been justified in her anger towards Milkman, whom she had loved and cherished, she instead extends merciful love when Milkman is arrested for the theft. Instead of filing charges against him, she changes her form in order to garner the police officers’ pity, appearing as a short, frightened old lady, rather than the tall, confident tree that she was. “Pilate had been shorter . . . she didn’t even come up to the sergeant’s shoulder . . . and her hands were shaking as she described how she didn’t know the sack was gone until the officer woke her up” (*Song of Solomon* 206).

Pilate is a “natural healer,” has an “alien’s compassion for troubled people,” has “respect for other people’s privacy,” and “she never ha[s] a visitor to whom she d[oes] not offer food before one word of conversation . . . beg[ins]” (*Song of Solomon* 149). Pilate was thus able to fly “without ever leaving the ground” (336). Her life of love, care and respect for other people defined her and allowed her to transcend the mundane.

After Ruth's father dies and Macon becomes enraged when he "catches" her kissing her father's dead fingers, he fabricates a plethora of sordid assumptions about the type of relationship Ruth actually had with her father. Ruth talks him out of killing her; however, Macon withdraws from his wife and moves to another room. Ruth is left "with nobody touching [her] or even looking as though they'd like to touch [her]" (*Song of Solomon* 125). The combination of her father's death, the one person who genuinely cared about her and Macon's withdrawal create Ruth's central trauma. With no genuine friend to talk to, no significant communal interaction and the withdrawal of affection from anyone, Ruth thought that "[she]'d really die if [she] had to live that way" (125).

After Macon's second rejection of her, Pilate had intended to leave Michigan and continue her sojourning lifestyle. However, observing Ruth's demise, she stays in Michigan in order to help Ruth and to perpetuate the familial line. Pilate's intervention aids in healing for Ruth and in the conception of Milkman. Pilate, once again, extends merciful love.

Milkman does not love other people. He loves himself and the pursuit of sensual pleasures. Self-centered and uncommitted, he feels no responsibility to home or family. He sees his mother as "insubstantial, too shadowy for love" (*Song of Solomon* 75); he assumes and expects Pilate, Reba, and Hagar's love for him, he overlooks the sacrifice of his sisters, who gave up their childhood to cater to him; and his father, the one person he claims to love, he does not give to or share himself with. Indeed, he is insensitive to the needs of his mother and sisters, careless and cruel in his affair with Hagar and unknowing about the effects of his actions.

Milkman's attitude to his mother and sister is mercenary. Vernersa C. White contends that Milkman is—"a true product of his environment in so far as his relationships with women are concerned" (73). Milkman extends his crippled vision to include 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* 75). Not only that. He spies over his mother and asks her to provide an explanation. Morrison movingly draws Ruth's response to her son in "I lived in a great big house that pressed me into a small package" (124). She further asserts, "I am not a strange woman but a small one" (124).

Milkman's initial disregard of persons other than himself extended even to those women with whom he was sexually intimate. Although five years his senior, Hagar's and Milkman's sexual play continued to excite and entertain Milkman well into his twenties. However, after their relationship had stretched out for more than a decade and she finally asked something of him, *commitment*, he discarded her like detritus. After all, she had become "the third beer. Not the first one, which the throat receives with almost tearful gratitude; nor the second, that confirms and extends the pleasure of the first. But the third, the one you drink because it's there, it can't hurt, and because what difference does it make?" (*Song of Solomon* 91). While Milkman was experiencing his spiritual epiphany in Shalimar, Hagar was dying in Michigan, of a broken heart.

Still attuned to the lessons he has learned from his father, Milkman offers to help Circe with money. She refuses it, telling him that he has helped her by listening to her story and sharing his own knowledge of Macon and Pilate. Milkman departs, but when he hitches a ride to town, he shows that he has not yet understood Circe's veiled warning to not devalue the lives of others. He never asks the name of the man who gives him a ride, then further insults him by offering to pay him. This same attitude buys him a fight at the general store in Shalimar. Milkman, who is assaulted when he speculates that he might buy a new car, believes that his

attackers are jealous of his wealth, but Morrison lets readers know that his impersonal attitude prompts their aggression:

He hadn't found them fit enough or good enough to want to know their names, and believed himself too good to tell them his. They looked at his skin and saw it was as black as theirs, but they knew he had the heart of the white men who came to pick them up in the trucks when they needed anonymous, faceless laborers. (*Song of Solomon* 266)

The men take their anger out on Milkman; they see him as a villain, not because of his money, but because he treats them as though they are invisible.

Milkman, who began the bobcat hunt as swaggering, arrogant child of the middle class, emerges from the woods a changed man. His soul-searching and his near death experience on the hunt has humbled him and he willingly confesses to the men that he is no match for them as a hunter. To say that he found his identity through his experience is to gloss over the knowledge he gains; Milkman finds his identity by realizing that others have identities. The hunting party is as alert to the change in Milkman as they were to the movements of the bobcat and once the animal is dressed, they point Milkman toward the home of the woman, Sweet, implying that he would gain more than a night's rest. And indeed he does, but the man who spends the night with Sweet is not the same man who had used and discarded Hagar. Milkman gives Sweet fifty dollars, but only after he had also given her a bath, washed her hair and also her dishes.

Milkman's increasing awareness regarding race oppression, class exploitation and gender subjugation steadily emerges. His awareness regarding race, class and gender facilitate his journey towards the quest for self. He questions the people and events around him. Through this inquiry he is able to arouse his consciousness and discover the variegated and crucial questions of identity in a composite American culture. It is Pilate who is responsible for Milkman's journey towards constructing his self and establishing his identity. Dorothy H. Lee makes a perceptive observation about Milkman's journey. She states that Milkman ". . . travels from innocence to awareness i.e., from ignorance of origins, heritage, identity and communal responsibility to knowledge and acceptance" (353).

K. Sumana pithily expounds the development in his class consciousness when he opines that Milkman "commits class suicide" (91). His awakened consciousness regarding race oppression and class exploitation pays the way for the sprouting of his consciousness regarding gender. During the early stages of his life women receive variegated forms of ill treatment from him. This vicious treatment, which he has meted out to women who had served his welfare, signifies his lack of gender consciousness. But when he reaches a high level of consciousness, his crippled view of women is totally changed. He realizes that all his life he had thought "he deserved to be loved," even while he refused any responsibility for the pain or problems of those who loved him. Morrison clearly lets readers know that this is Milkman's defining moment. She tells us that the "cocoon" that had defined Milkman's "personality" gave way (*Song of Solomon* 277).

During his journey Milkman realizes that, "[w]ith 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 them a cup of tea" (*Song of Solomon* 331). With self-awakening he comes to value the great assistance he had received from women like Pilate and Hagar. He begins to respect women and the poor blacks. His new attitude entails his renunciation of the commoditized way of life. He begins to embrace the feminist trend that called for equal rights for

men and women. His former biased view of women is buried forever. He develops reciprocal relationships with women. This reciprocity is manifested through Pilate's guidance to bury the "dead in him" (Sumana 91) and Milkman's direction of Pilate to bury her father's carcass. He becomes a source of life and acts as a catalyst for women.

Participation in the "Seven Days" serves to feed Guitar's repressed anger, fan the flames of his hunting prowess, and free him to hunt whomever he chooses. Guitar becomes a killer. When Milkman leaves in search of the gold, alone without Guitar, Guitar's resentment at Macon for being just like a white man, anger at Pilate for her "aunt Jemima act" before the police and suspicions of Milkman's treachery in seeking to take the gold for himself coalesce (*Song of Solomon* 209). He heads to Pennsylvania and then Virginia to kill Milkman; "he had snatched the first straw, limp and wet as it was, to prove to himself the need to kill Milkman" (331).

Just as Pilate places the earring that contains her name into the grave, she is shot by Guitar who mistakes her for Milkman. Cradling the head of his dying mentor, Milkman is overcome by love for the first time in his life. Pilate's dying words underscore the focus of her life and her place in Morrison's texts, "I wish I'd a knowed more people. I would [have] loved 'em all. If I'd a knowed more, I would a loved more" (*Song of Solomon* 336). Milkman whispers a wish of his own: "Now he knew why he loved her so. Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly. 'There must be another one just like you,' he whispered to her" (336).

Wilfred D Samuels states that Milkman has become "... one, who has been shaped not only solely by his environment, but his distinct choices and actions" (67). He experiences strange loneliness which cannot be assuaged by the quirks he boasts of. "There was nothing here to help him—not his money, his car, his father's reputation, his suit, or his shoes. In fact, they hampered him" (*Song of Solomon* 277). This loss of his clothes symbolizes the loss of "the white cultural values he has absorbed and assimilated at the expense of his black values" (Peach 60-61).

When Milkman is leaving Susan Byrd, he asks about the watch he had left with Grace. Susan tells him he will probably not get it back because Grace will have a great time talking about the watch the northern man gave her. It is significant that Milkman decide to accept the loss of his watch, which indicates that Milkman loses western concept of time that is linear. It insinuates that he espouses the African concept of time, which is cyclical. The son of the man whose only advice was that "time is money" relinquishes what was perhaps the most significant symbol of his "modern" identity.

The song that the children in Shalimar sing during their games intrigues him; it is the same song that Pilate has been singing, inaccurately, for years. From Susan, he learns that the subject of the children's song is his great grandfather, Solomon, one of the legendary "flying Africans" who, so it was told, flew back to Africa to escape slavery. Milkman, always intrigued by the idea of flight, is quite taken with the idea of a great-grandfather who dared flight for his freedom. At the end, he realizes that Ryna and the twenty-one children, his great-grandfather left behind, paid the price for his freedom. The children's song is not a celebration of a heroic "flight," but a mournful lament about the betrayal of responsibility.

Although only Hagar's image "flashe[s] before him," as the woman whom he mistreated the most, the picture of her "bending over him in perfect love," despite his abusive behavior, personifies and epitomizes the type of merciful love he has been shown by all of the women in his life (*Song of Solomon* 279). Unlike the depiction of his former behavior delineated by Magdalena, "to this day, you have never asked one of us if we were tired, or sad, or wanted a cup of coffee," Milkman finally learns the importance of reciprocity (215).

While Milkman is privately envisioning Hagar and recognizing their spiritual connectivity, the Southside community in Michigan is publically acknowledging that same linkage through Hagar's funeral. Thus, the cries for "Mercy!" voiced through Pilate's and Reba's song at Hagar's funeral are answered in Shalimar through Milkman's resurrection and spiritual renewal (*Song of Solomon* 316). The momentous transformation evident in Milkman, after his rebirth, is as a result of the mercy he will now have "in the nighttime . . . in the darkness . . . in the morning . . . at [his] bedside . . . [and] on [his] knees" (317-8).

Milkman realizes his previous relationship with others was based on the attitude that "I am not responsible for your pain; share your happiness with me but not your unhappiness" (*Song of Solomon* 277). He belatedly realizes that he is to blame for Hagar's tragic death. He had flown off, but it was Hagar who suffered and died in his absence: "Just as the consequences of Milkman's own stupidity would remain and regret would always outweigh the things he was proud of having done. Hagar was dead and he had not loved her one bit" (335). For Milkman, this realization that he can never escape the consequences of his actions is the most difficult and painful of all. Accepting his responsibility for Hagar's death, he decides to carry with him Hagar's box of hair, which symbolizes his new awareness of the past. His act can be constructed as expiation for his inhuman treatment and exploitation of Hagar. The recognition of his mistakes can be construed as an act of expiation and repentance for his past. He atones for the severe hurts he had inflicted on the psyches of others, particularly of women. He feels "a sudden rush of affection for them all" (278). Milkman rises to this awareness when he comes to the stage of outgrowing his vanity, self-veneration and the feeling of apathy for others.

The realization of Milkman's spiritual death and renewal is further illustrated in his abandonment of the quest for the gold. No longer focused on securing freedom through money or running away from his familial responsibilities Milkman becomes excited about the discovery of the facts of his ancestry. His brief relationship with Sweet provides him with the forum necessary to learn and express reciprocal love. As Milkman begins to love, he also confronts his family's living heart, beating in love and sadness. For the first time, he feels homesick and misses the family he had been so determined to leave. With his heart, he sees his parents in a new light. He looks at his mother and sees how sexual deprivation "would affect her, hurt her in precisely the same way it would affect and hurt him" (*Song of Solomon* 300). He sees how this deprivation has distorted her life, actions and creativity. Then, looking at his father, he sees how Macon Dead loves what Solomon had loved and how he has distorted that love: "That he distorted life, beat it, for the sake of gain, was a measure of his loss at his father's death" (300). There is a clear shift in Milkman's values. While he had once valued his own freedom and power, he now sees the value of family ties. With renewed enthusiasm, he searches for his family history—not the gold he began his journey looking for. His new awareness of people around him precipitates his initiation into new society governed by the tradition and the mores of African people. He shows us a real transformation in his personality when he "accepts the responsibility of adulthood and Africanhood" (Sumana 90). This can be elicited from the statement: "he had stopped evading things, sliding through, over and around difficulties" (*Song of Solomon* 271).

At the end of the novel, Milkman knows that Guitar "needs" his life and he declares his willingness to give it. He shouts to him, "You want my life? You need it? Here." He leaps toward Guitar, knowing that "if you surrendered to the air, you could *ride* it" (*Song of Solomon* 337). Morrison does not allow readers the comfort of certainty. We never know for sure whether Milkman "flies" or dies.

If Milkman Dead begins his journey in conflict and ignorance, he ends it in complete awareness. Barbara E. Cooper observes:

On Solomon's Leap, he understands how little value there is in property and how priceless are family relationships and connections. By losing everything in search of gold, Milkman is released from the burden of his self-indulgence. Like the peacock, he was weighed down by his vanity and greed. However, when he sets aside this deadening weight, he finds a life-giving treasure in family history and remembrance (156)

Through his journey south, Milkman confronts his own heart and responsibility to others and learns the value of family ties through song and family stories. "As long as he casts off family responsibility, he is truly dead but when he sings the songs and learns the stories, he is alive" (156).

Milkman breaks free from the avid materialism that seduced and enslaved him. He is thus able to return to Michigan as a new man. Armed with a new sense of self, a heart of mercy, an understanding of love and a willingness to confront the consequences of his former actions, he finally flies, "without ever leaving the ground" (*Song of Solomon* 336). Ultimately, he emerges as a triumphant hero who traces the genesis of his rich history and culture and succeeds in identifying with the community, spirituality and physically. He establishes his identity and finds meaning in life. He emerges as a totally changed man, a new Milkman.

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