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Singing the Forgotten Saga of Black Culture, Myth and Identity: A Study of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*

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Abstract:

Toni Morrison, with her literary corpus, made it quintessential for the critics of American literature to rethink and rewrite the outline of American literature. The account of Morrison's literary career speaks of her vision and comprehension of Black culture, myth and community in the running century. The paper reads her novel *Song of Solomon* from the cultural and political perspectives and finds in it the plea for substantiating and enriching the African American folk culture that has long been effaced by both external as well as internal dynamics. The paper seeks to investigate the issues of the novel and finds a picture of Black community carrying the ramifications of racism. The Black characters strive to restore and reclaim their identity, both individual and collective, and their folktales, folksongs and myths struggling against the damaging effects of racism. The 'myth of flying man-Solomon', in the novel, symbolizes the escape from the slavery. At the same time, it indicates to the escape by man leaving behind others, women and family. The study finds an important role of the Black women in preservation and reclamation of their art and culture along with performing familial liabilities in spite of being abandoned and sabotaged. However, they proceed to the discovery of self, their roots and culture.

Keywords: Black culture, myth, language, identity, individual and collective identity, nomenclature

Toni Morrison, 1993 Nobel Laureate, has always perceived herself as a writer with a racial and cultural identity, a gender identity, and a national and regional identity. Her career is punctuated with honorary degrees from various universities like Harvard, Yale and Columbia. With her acclaimed work, she has made it latent for the text of both African American and feminist writers to rewrite the outline of American literature. The consciousness of being Black in Toni Morrison leads to attributing her work the characteristics of Black arts literature. Black arts, or Black aesthetic, call for literary expression that has an African American point of view. Black arts literature addresses the major issues of the Black political movements of the 1960s and beyond, and it demands for recreation of Black history, symbols, myths and legends and more importantly, language. Morrison's fiction represents Black literature both ideologically and aesthetically having the accountability to Black culture and art, use of Black myths, story-telling,

symbols and language etc. Morrison has stated in a conversation with Alice Childress that the artist is “a politician” and thus he/she “bears witness” to the lives and lived experience of Black people (qtd. in Taylor-Guthrie 2). Political concerns are very important to Morrison as she herself admits having an ideological agenda in her work, “The work must be political. It must have that as its thrust...The best art is political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time” (Morrison, “Rootedness” 64). Her novels reflect the influence of the ideologies propounded by Black movements of 1960s and 70s when they discuss the oppressed Black minorities in isolated communities.

The novel, *Song of Solomon*, propounding her political philosophy on racial and gender problems, revolves around the theme of race. During her formative years of life i.e. 1940s, 50s, and 60s, Toni Morrison closely watched the harshness of racism and segregation. In the opening chapter of *Song of Solomon*, she describes how the hospital had never admitted a Black patient until Ruth Dead, mother of the protagonist, Milkman (Morrison, *Song of Solomon* 4-5). From his childhood, racism affects Milkman's life. Guitar, one of Milkman's closest friends gets infuriated by the unjust treatment done to Blacks, and this condition nurtures violent thoughts in him. As Milkman delves deep in a longing to know his family's history, he learns how his family confronted racism in the past, how his grandfather was killed by a White man, and how his great-grandfather escaped from bondage of slavery. In this novel, Guitar also lost his father in a factory incident and has been leading a life of poverty. However, he appears to be more affected and concerned with ramifications of race and he reacts with violent aggression to these. The novel illustrates how America's history of racism has affected the author- Morrison and how she perceives it.

The idea of racial oppression has been central to Toni Morrison's writing. Along with this, gender oppression has been her great concern. Rigney writes, “For Morrison...gender is not separate from racial identity; while arguments are for liberation from racial and gender oppression, both race and gender themselves are always seen as liberating points from which to construct a language or to create a literature that is political in forms as well as in subject matter” (2). Morrison dissects the American society and perceives that the white exploits the Black and even the White men and Black throw their frustration on their women- Black women. “The meaning of blackness”, Valerie Smith indicates, “shapes profoundly the experience of gender, just as the conditions of womanhood affect inculcatable of race” (47).

Morrison's works show the gender discrimination in their communities and unfold the *internal oppression* faced by women. The race, class and gender discrimination have constructed some of the major realities of the life of Black community as reflected in *Song of Solomon*. The author makes the reader aware of the persistent trauma of gender inflected racial attitude. The issue of patriarchy has been taken up in the novel, when Lena questions the dependency of women in the Black social structure. In the effort to get free from the net of patriarchy, the character discovers the ‘self’ and proceeds to self-making and self-reliance.

Song of Solomon was published in 1977 with the Black Arts movement at its culmination. The movement believed that the main aim of Black artistic expression was to bring a change in social plight of Blacks along with political revolution. It attaches the element of being political with the literary expression as a standard to affirm its validity. Morrison herself has affirmed the validity of a literary expression if it makes a political statement, “all good art has always been political” (qtd. in Taylor-Guthrie 3). She further adds that the Black artist has a responsibility to the Black community. Her work *Song of Solomon* demonstrates what Stephanie Li writes of Morrison, the author shares “a commitment to exploring the inter-related nature of oppressive social systems” with other Black writers. Morrison’s commitment to Black society extends to efforts to preserve key aspects of African American history.

The social commitment of Morrison provokes her to use Black myths, folklore and African oral traditions. Toni Morrison also calls her work “village literature” and “Peasant literature for my people” and believes that good novels ought to “clarify the roles of that have become obscured...and they ought to give nourishment” (qtd. in Taylor-Guthrie 120-121). Her works authenticate the plea for substantiating and enriching an African American folk culture that has long been effaced by both external as well as internal dynamics. *Song of Solomon* illustrates an African American folktale (of flying ancestor) to negate the loss of the folklore tradition and to redeem it that frames one of the basic elements of African American culture. The use of Black myth of flying man, Solomon, and Black folk songs sung by Pilate, bear a witness to Morrison’s effort to retrieve the cultural past of Black community. The folksong and folktale of flying man also implies that the men could escape from slavery through flying, figuratively or literally, though they left behind abandoned women with the responsibility to take care. Still, the flight is perceived as a glorious and triumphant act;

“O Solomon don’t leave me here
 Cotton balls to choke me
 O Solomon don’t leave me there
 Buckra’s arms to yoke me
 Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone
 Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home” (Morrison, *Song of Solomon* 303).

Morrison herself explains; “the flying myth in *Song of Solomon*...it is about black people who could fly. That was always part of the folklore of my life; flying was one of our gifts. I don’t care how silly it may seem. It is everywhere – people used to talk about it, it’s in the spirituals and gospels. Perhaps it was wishful thinking – escape, death, and all that. But suppose it wasn’t. What might it mean? I tried to find out in *Song of Solomon*” (qtd. in Taylor-Guthrie 122). But, at the same time, Morrison also tells the significance of “flying without ever leaving the ground” (*Song of Solomon* 340), that is in the case of Black women, here Pilate. This effort to examine the cultural myths connects to the wish to explain and broaden reality of them, and brings her

work closer to a distinctly Afro-centric literary approach. To accomplish this, her style contains various components of “African modes of storytelling” which present “a way of bridging gaps between the Black community’s folk roots and the Black American literary tradition” (Wilentz 61).

Hence, not only the content but the means of communication of thoughts and ideas carries the rich tone of Black people in Morrison’s writing. Fultz analyses it as, “Morrison’s fiction especially calls attention to the power of language to construct alternative ways of viewing the African-American experience” (17). Morrison, herself, accepts, “I wanted to restore the language that black people spoke to its original power. That calls for a language that is rich but not ornate” (qtd. in Taylor-Guthrie 121). The language of Black people is displayed in her fiction through her narrative style of story-telling, oral-tradition (songs), shifting narratives and use of flashbacks as a technique to recall past and retrieve history and use of flashbacks thereby interconnecting past and present of Blacks. All these stylistic devices conform to her political message of her work deeply infused in the rich legacies of Black treasure of language. *Song of Solomon* is replete with examples of songs, shifting narratives and use of flashbacks.

In an interview with Christina Davis in 1986, Morrison asserts that “the reclamation of the history of black people in this country is paramount in its importance...and the job of recovery is ours” (Morrison qtd. in Gates, Jr. and Appiah 413). Her statement highlights a major theme of her work. She finds the affirmation of Black existence in the requisite resurgence of Black culture. Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* exemplifies the icon of Blackness in the character of Pilate and sings the Black myths and folklore. Pilate emerges as a strong envoy of Black culture bearing the torch to the protagonist of the novel, Milkman Dead. Pilate, an important character and aunt of Milkman Dead, affirms and rejuvenates Black identity. She functions as the emblem of Blackness by offering a great insight, inspiring to reclaim the lost identity and providing shelter to other Blacks.

Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* addresses the question of self and identity of Black women within Black community. “*Song of Solomon* asks, among other things, what is the role of women in African-American cultural memory?” (Fultz 7). In this novel, Morrison has delineated the characters of Pilate, Hagar, Ruth and Lena. Pilate is an exemplary character of Black woman who denies being a victim of male or societal oppression and sustains a strong individual identity. The action of wearing her name in her ear by Pilate is a symbolic act of cherishing her identity. Likewise, she “had taken a rock from every state she had lived in—because she *had* lived there” (Morrison, *Song of Solomon* 329). This act indicates a sense of belonging of Pilate to her Black culture and land. Pilate accepts, though later, her mysterious biological fact of missing navel, “After a while she stopped worrying about her stomach and stopped trying to hide it...Then she tacked the wanted of live and what was valuable to her” (Morrison, *Song of Solomon* 148-149). She has a sense of self reflection through her songs and realizes her own worth, repudiating servitude designed for Black women by racially structured society. Ruth and Hagar, meagerly, share Pilate’s strength to some extent. Ruth feels for herself a “small

woman...pressed small” by living conditions (Morrison, *Song of Solomon* 123-124). Throughout her life, her marriage acts like a restrain or repression: “(she) began her days stunned into stillness by her husband’s contempt and ended them wholly animated by it “(10). Quite contrary to Pilate, Ruth has not any realization of self identity and no communication with self rather she assimilates it in her husband and son. Hagar also shares this mute identity with Ruth leading to self destruction. Hagar, Ruth and Lena face the patriarchal approach from their father, who “mangle (s) their grace, wit and self-esteem” (Morrison, *Song of Solomon* 10). Lena, somehow, amid these muffled and hushed identities, is able to recover her individuality. She contends the repression and patriarchal domination in a heated argument with her brother, “You’ve been laughing at us all your life...Mama. Me using us, ordering us, and judging us...Where do you get the right to decide our lives?...I’ll tell you where...Now get out of my room” (215-216).

As the novel progresses, Morrison develops Lena’s character embellished with self consciousness or awareness. She now claims the identity that was crushed by her father and brother. She emerges as a strong, self-aware individual demanding autonomy. Lena and Pilate carry a message for African American woman to restore their individual identity amid the oppression. Pilate, as a singer both literally and symbolically, expresses the outcome of Morrison’s examination of her society in the form of the cautionary tale to empower the collective cultural identity of Blacks. As Alice Walker writes in *Meridian*, “It is the song of people, transformed by the experience of each generation, that holds them together” (205-206).

Identity formation starts early in life and depends on cultural demands and personal capacity. In this process, two types of identity are speculated- social or community identity and self or individual identity. Social identity is a self definition that helps to evaluate oneself. Whereas self-identity or self-concept is basically the result of what we have learned from other people. It can be said that, “one’s self-identity is a basic schema consisting of an organized collection of beliefs and attitudes about oneself” (Baron, Byrne and Branscombe 162).

Song of Solomon also deals with individual identity of a person conceptualized with the importance of nomenclature. In the novel, the author shifts her focus on African American man, Milkman Dead. While exploring his family heritage, Milkman moves from innocence to self-awareness. Such an exploration succeeds when Milkman examines traditional African American history, mythology, and culture and “discovers, understands and respects these traditions” so that he then “discovers the meaning of his name, his own life, and his familial past” (Moblely 95). The novel explains that acquiring names of their own choosing is necessary to secure an identity. Because losing one’s name results in loss of connection with their ancestry. Milkman sets out in search of his identity. During this quest he comes across the significant difference between a given name and choosing it deliberately. Milkman’s aunt, Pilate ripped her name out of the family Bible and placed it in a brass box she then hung from her left ear. This symbolic act of her aunt instills the sense of self-identity in Milkman. On the other hand, Milkman’s father, Macon Dead, weighs earning money and possessing things over

any other thing in life. He seems to be under impact of White and capitalist culture where identity results from material possessions. Initially, Milkman believes his father, but eventually, he discovers the emptiness of this materialism on his journey to the South. This subconscious journey transforms Milkman and he discovers that his identity is not obtained from material accumulation; instead his individual and communal history is the genesis of his sense of self. His journey is not the sequel of Western heroic myths; it is not about finding the gold or even about proving his manhood. Rather, Milkman's journey is about his gradual acquisition of an identity and more importantly, the fact that his identity emerges and depends upon his connection to the African American community. Apparently, the quest for individual self is connected to the collective identity for its fulfillment and completion. Circe and Pilate play a very important role in the novel as they assist Milkman in finding out his identity at different stages of his life. 'These Black women function as preservers of Black culture and serve as spiritual guides for the wayward Milkman' (Beaulieu 317). They enable him to define himself and his family's past.

The importance of individual relationship with social reality /social circumstances/ community can be traced from the view of cultural ideologies. Examining the social awakening of the self with outer selves is a significant step to understand how Morrison communicates the relation between individual and community in the context of self-consciousness, self-examination and self-identification. Stephen Butterfield's view is very pertinent here, "The self belongs to the people, and the people find a voice in the self" (Butterfield 3). Throughout the novel, Morrison emphasizes that the construction of individual identity is inseparable from the community. Her work outsources that self identity is not just a reflection of an inner essence rather it is constructed through social circumstances and relations. In her fiction, the characters, generally, discover self who are close to the community for example Son in *Tar Baby*, Milkman Dead in *Song of Solomon*, and Claudia in *The Bluest Eye*. Whereas, the characters who fail to internalize community or reject it, confront tragedy. Pauline Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* and Sula in *Sula* are such examples. Morrison herself has described community as "both a support system and a hammer at the same time" (qtd. in Smith 50). Milkman Dead's character italicizes or gives emphasis on the community's influence on creating individual character. The sense of discovering self comes to Milkman Dead as he gets to know the legend of his great grandfather, Solomon, who could fly and this self is realized through selves of his African American community only.

To conclude, *Song of Solomon* takes up the issues from the Black world, their struggle against White oppression, their agency of survival, and their culture, music and folk. Through the relation between individual and community, Morrison dissects not only individuals in their journey of self-realization and self-examination, but she evaluates and introspects her Black community as well. The novel presents the glimpses of the gender discrimination, somewhere overt and somewhere covert. It brings us the Morrison portraying Black community with a

dissecting pen which writes the voyage of self exploration and self-introspection of the characters claiming and retrieving the forgotten Black legacy, folk tradition and culture.

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