



Racism and Quest for an Identity as Depicted in

Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*

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Abstract

Since the days of the Civil War (1861-1865) Afro-Americans came on the forefront of American literary scene. Many Northern American writers had tried to present the suppressed and meaningless life of Afro-Americans in their writings. But they are not able to capture the psyche of Afro-American community. Even after hundred years of Civil War illegal practices like lynching, castration, and racial discrimination were going on. In the decade of 1960, Afro-Americans had united themselves and fought vigorously for their rights. They won their battle and in this win the Afro-American writers have played a crucial role. They make their suffering visible in front of their readers. Dense in style, Afro-American writings used many allusions, their own past history and myths. This paper tries to explore how Toni Morrison has presented the grotesque system of racism in her novel *Song of Solomon*. In this paper I have also tried to present how Morrison has presented

Afro-Americans quest for identity to counter argue racism in *Song of Solomon*.

Full Text of the Paper

Since the days of the Civil War (1861-1865) Afro-Americans came on the forefront of American literary scene. Many Northern American writers had tried to present the suppressed and meaningless life of Afro-Americans in their writings. But they are not able to capture the psyche of Afro-American community. Even after hundred years of the Civil War illegal practices like lynching, castration, and racial discrimination were going on. In the decade of 1960, Afro-Americans had united themselves and fought vigorously for their rights. They won their battle and in this win the African American writers had played a crucial role. African American writers had made their suffering visible in front of their readers. Dense in style, African American writings used many allusions, their own past history and myths. Among the women of different cultures, the black American woman has a unique position. She has drawn attention by and large due to her abject situation. Uprooted from her native African culture she has been placed in the dominant white Euro-Christian culture. The black woman was doubly enslaved in the white, patriarchal, racist society. The nefarious system of slavery hardly permitted or allowed an individual identity to the black woman, leave apart recognition of her talents or entity. The impact of sexism on the black woman's social status was that she was manipulated by the system for almost three hundred years. Her virtue was violated. Toni Morrison, the black southerner, feels vicariously the passion for of the black and transforms the personal immediacy of Afro-American genderized, sexualized, and racialized world into writing. In this paper I have also tried

to present how Morrison has presented the grotesque system of racism in her novel *Song of Solomon* and also the quest for identity of the African Americans' quest for identity to counter argue racism in the novel. Toni Morrison has tried to present a vivid and dense picture of racism in her novel *Song of Solomon*. From the beginning of the novel we come across the grotesque system of racism prevailed in southern America. “Not Doctor Street” and “No Mercy Hospital” itself tells us a lot about the social condition. People tended to call the hospital “No Mercy Hospital” because it does not admit no African-American people. Thus, Morrison begins her novel with the central issue of the novel, that is racism. Guitar, Milkman’s friend has also very cruel past. His father has been died in front of him in a saw-mill where he was working. The saw mill owner has tried to hide his mistake by giving him few candies. The knowledge that his father has been died because of the white employer’s negligence makes Guitar especially sensitive to the injustices perpetrated against African Americans. Emmett Till’s murder and the Birmingham Church bombing remind Guitar of his own tragedy, transforming him into a ruthless, vengeful murderer. Guitar’s story shows that racism alienates its victims from their native communities and causes them to lose touch with their own humanity. Macon Dead is the personification of African American middle class who wants to merge themselves with the White American culture because of his greed. Toni Morrison does not spend the African American who is not willing to take care of their community. Macon Dead who becomes wealthier on the basis of the poverty of African American. He never tries to sympathize with his fellow beings. He considers himself as a superior person and ridicules his community members. Milkman, his son, also has been nourished in the same

way. He behaves in the same way of his father and ridicules everyone. After his realization and knowledge of his ancestors he feels great pity for his misbehaviour. Milkman's journey to know his past is full of racial discrimination. Circe told him about his grandfather's death. His grandfather was killed by the Whites during the Civil War. In Shalimar, he comes to know about Solomon who has been able to escape from the tenants of slavery. Soloman has become hero for the African American community as he has been able to go back to his native country. In praise of Soloman, the people of Shalimar sing a song "Solomon don't leave me." Guitar shakes hand with "Seven Days" because they want to take revenge. African Americans have also adopted a cruel way of justice. If any Black was killed or lynched they will kill a White. The presence of organizations like "Ku Klux Klan" and the "Seven Days" itself suggest the prevailing of social evil, racism. Empire state, the barber also tells that the news of lynching will never published on the front page because it is not a serious issue in the eyes of the Whites. The so-called White capitalists have made African American's life more and more worse. The Agrarian Southern America, wants to depend upon African slaves because of their wicked mental attitude towards the blacks. For them Blacks are not human beings but they are their property. For their sake only they have created social hierarchy which is fake. Morrison's choice of names for her characters in itself indicates the racial discrimination. She wants to give new names to the Blacks and thus introduces names like "Milkman," "Railroad Tommy," "Hospital Tommy," "Empire State" etc. On behalf of White man's negligence, Macon loses his father's name and "Dead" becomes part of which is more or less appropriate in case of Macon Dead Jr.

Almost all the characters in *Song of Soloman* are black. The few white characters represent violence and wrongdoing. Guitar's case is most visible. Likewise, Circe's wealthy white employers, the Butlers, are murderers. When they take Macon Dead Sr.'s land, they end his children's innocence. Even white animals carry negative connotations. A white bull causes Freddie's mother to go into labour and die. The bull's interference with Freddie's birth represents White people's devastating interference with the African American world. Many critics have opined that Morrison is not able to understand the complexity of the African-American world. In the words of Kwame Nkrumah, while "capitalist exploitation and race oppression are complementary, the removal of [the first] ensures the removal of the other." In her article "Song of Solomon: The Struggle for Race and Class Consciousness" Doreatha Drummond Mbalia has also concluded that "Milkman sees himself as an African exploited by capitalism and oppressed by racism, but he offers no solution to this dilemma. Instead he surrenders to exploitation and oppression. Rather than moving beyond the act of defeatism exhibited by his forefather, he repeats it. Knowing what Shalimar knew, he surrenders to the air." But in my view one should not feel ashamed of his/her belonging and s/he should acknowledge it publicly and thus the blacks will unite to fight against their exploitation and able to create their own identity.

Song of Soloman is based around the search of a young black man, Milkman Dead, for his legacy. In "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," Morrison describes ancestors as a 'sort of timeless people whose relationship to the characters are benevolent, instructive and protective, and they provide certain kind of wisdom.' Morrison's most novels deal with the realization of an identity. Milkman Dead grows up in the privilege gained by class status,

unaware and largely unconcerned with racial injustices because of his privilege.

In Valerie Smith's view,

“ Milkman's father, Macon Dead, Jr., is a quintessential self-made man. Orphaned and disinherited in his adolescence, he wheeled and dealt his way into his position as the richest black man in town.... Macon has come to believe that money, property and keys are what is real in the world; his financial success has thus cost him capacity for communication and emotion. As he advises his son: 'come to my office; work a couple of hours there and learn what's real.... **own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too.**” Thus, wounded by his past he wants to know about his forefathers. Milkman, in a process which begins when he strikes his father, eventually frees himself from his father's obsessive capitalism. In his quest for roots, Guitar Baines, his friend and Pilate, his aunt, pave a way for him towards self-identity. Pilate, who herself has remained unsuccumbed to the White norms and retained her black identity, narrates him her self account. Milkman begins his journey with the presumption that he is searching for stolen gold in hopes that this gold will seed his future and grant him freedom. He learns that the only means of gaining his freedom is in ridding himself of the encumbrances of his material privilege. On the first stop of his journey, Milkman finds himself among man of his father's generation who tell him the story of his parental grandfather's strength in leaving slavery and making a farm of his own. Afterwards his grandfather was killed and his children are forced to flee. In Danville, Pennsylvania, Milkman learns for the first time of the strength and determination of his ancestors. He learns of what he lost before

he was even born and he recognizes for the first time the injustices of racism in America. He also comes to know about his father's misdeeds and how he exploited his fellow beings. But he forgives his parents and learns the value of love. He realizes his errors and the novel ends with its moral value: “ if you surrender to the air, you can ride it.” Thus, Milkman has left behind all the encumbrances of his class position, encumbrances that have cut him off from his fellow African Americans, from his family and from his past. Thus, the gold that Milkman eventually finds in his journey is knowledge about his ancestors and his ethnic heritage, a treasure that proves to be far more valuable in his growth than any sack of gold coins. Milkman's journey is teleological. The journey is from the North dominated by urban, white middle class values to the Black South and it is the latter which reveals the former fully for what is. Milkman's travel – by plane, by bus and then on foot – is emblematic of the way in which he sheds layers of his formal cultural identity. Gradually, he loses his clothes, watch, suitcase and shoes, symbolizing the white cultural values he has absorbed and assimilated at the expense of black values. The loss of watch is especially significant because Milkman loses the western concept of time which is essentially linear as opposed to a traditional African concept of time which is cyclical. Though the epigraph mentions only the forefather's in the novel and the book is dedicated to 'Daddy,' it is the woman who provides Milkman's true inheritance, black cultural identity and ancestry particularly his aunt, Pilate. Pilate becomes quite literally Milkman's pilot or guiding force. Her rootlessness is symbolized by the rocks which she carries, each one a remembrance of a place to which she has been and like the name she carries, each one a remembrance of a place to which she has been and like the name

she carries in a box a bag of bones. A bag of bones also symbolizes her search for a place of belonging. Thus, Pilate becomes an ultimate source and moral power for Milkman in his search for identity. Milkman's journey that Morrison charts is a reversal. Generally, African-American do migrate from the South to the North to avoid segregation and lynching. But here Milkman's journey from the North to the South itself imparts the importance of his past in his life. Singing is also a means of maintaining a link to a forgotten family history. In a community where most of the past generations were illiterate, songs rather than history books tell the story of the past. Songs record details about Milkman's quest to Virginia. Similarly, the songs Milkman hears about Solomon and Ryna inform him of the mysterious fate of his ancestors and keep him on the path of self-discovery. Thus, racism is the central cause of suffering in the novel. Racism has long-lasting damaging effects on the community. Slavery causes Solomon to flee towards freedom and end his marriage to Ryna. Morrison has presented the world of African American family and its surroundings. In her view, if African Americans have to survive in America, then they have to unite themselves. They have to fight against racism unitedly. With the help of Milkman's character she appeals the African Americans to leave the economic barrier and rouses their feelings to get rights. Also one can easily see Morrison's appeal to the whole African American community and plea them to know their identity. She does so because she wants to prevail their own culture. It is not that she wants to make fun of white people but at times she also raises voice against Black middle class which did not want to help poor African Americans. In her view, one should not feel ashamed of his/her belonging

and s/he should acknowledge it publicly. Morrison gives her message through Milkman's words: "If you surrender to the air, you can ride it."

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