
BURIED HERITAGE OF MILKMAN III IN SONG OF SOLOMON

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the protagonist Milkman Dead. The paper highlights the buried heritage of Milkman III in Song of Solomon and the oppressed black minorities in isolated communities. Toni Morrison's third novel Song of Solomon (1977) mainly dwells upon Milkman and his journey towards self discovery involving racial conflict, social transition, communal values and the peculiarities of human existence that manifest the individual behavior in an African-America heritage. His quest to identify the meaning of his life and his family background in the western racist society is depicted in the novel Song of Solomon. His search for identity involves recognizing racial conflict, social transition, communal values and overcoming his dependence and emotional isolation through assimilation of his familial narrative. Milkman takes a long journey to comprehend the vitality such as artificiality, shallowness and fake values of his life. Milkman eventually completes the stages of a hero's journey that lead to spiritual transformation from fantasy to realism. Milkman transcends both his humanity and mortality and attains God like stature. Morrison through her exposition of Milkman's transformation establishes genuine identity in her fictional work.

Keywords: self discovery - racial conflict - social transition - communal values - racist society - emotional isolation

Class, race, colonization and slavery are dominant tropes of oppression operative in society. They in a larger sense are metaphorical of the oppression of women. *Song of Solomon* is considered to be the best work of Toni Morrison which has given her recognition as an American Writer. *Song of Solomon* presents an interesting illustration of the manner in which equations of power at the levels of gender, class and traditions function in a literary work.

Morrison shifts the female point to an African-American male perspective in *Song of Solomon*. The first two novels of Toni Morrison' *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* are about the female identity, whereas *Song of Solomon* is about an intricate story of a young black man on the self-discovery of Macon Dead III in the 20th century United States. Morrison for the first time brings a male character as the protagonist, Macon Dead III, known as Milkman Dead, in this novel. Macon or "Milkman" sets out on a series of journeys to restore lost wealth in his family's past. Instead of finding out economic wealth he discovers a more precious one. His search for identity involves racial conflict, social

transition and communal values. According to 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 search for his roots. He initiates a journey to the "mythic past" (Spallino 511). *Song of Solomon* starts with the flying leap of an agent for North Carolina Mutual Life, an insurance company owned by and dependent upon Blacks. Margo Jefferson praised the novel in a News Week review. She said, "Toni Morrison's earlier novels have received high praise; this one is being trumpeted as her major achievement." (Margo Jefferson: "*Black Gold*" 93)

Milkman's journey to uncover his roots can be compared to Morrison's own. Milkman apart from the quest for identity as a black man, he gradually tries to connect the history of his ancestors, which he achieves by journeying into his father and aunt's past. He also searches the sources and meanings of names for identity. Milkman discovers a kind of mythology and his character is enriched on the journey from Michigan, to Ohio, to Virginia. Born and raised in Michigan, with no awareness of ancestry and only scant knowledge about his family. Milkman learns the mysterious Pilate, his aunt's appearance and unbelievable powers have caused her to become a benevolent outsider. She lives apart with her daughter and granddaughter. The relationship forged between Pilate and Milkman changes the lives of these characters.

Macon Dead II endeavors to own himself and manage his fate by means of acquiring material wealth in the north. However, he fails to own himself and become confined to the material things which he obtains ironically. His single-minded aspiration, his deceitful greed, his unabashed materialism, his disloyalty to the ancestors' traditional culture and his rejection of nature has changed him, from a "nice boy" to a firm, greedy, selfish, prudent and unloving man. The only thing the acquisitive black property owner and land developer cares about is to possess the material wealth. There is no love in his world.

Macon Dead II never understands that to his father, the farm was more important than mere assets. Jake Solomon symbolizes the wish-fulfillment of an ex-slave. Jake's success was significant to the entire black community of Montour country that took pride in his success which symbolizes that they also can achieve prominence through industry. Jake is adored for his wealth, possessions and ambition, where as Macon is detested for the same traits. Jake's success is at the cost of the white community, and in this regard his eccentricity serves the community.

Macon Dead II marries Ruth for his personal progression rather than love. He denies his only sister Pilate just for a bag of gold. He is a distant husband, father and brother, disdainful of his wife, children and sister. He forgets his black identity gradually and looks down upon the poor black. When Porter, a tenant of him, threatens to commit suicide, he hurries to go to the scene to collect his rents but not to save life. At that time, he was a nice brother and a nice son. However, his inflated desire for material wealth drives him away from all of these. He is not the simple, honest and kind boy any

longer. Therefore, he can never get rid of his sense of loss because he ignores and suppresses the inner, cultural voices of survival from his past.

Macon Dead, who is a money-minded man, influences Milkman not to leave his hometown. Finally departing from his splintered family role models, Milkman travels to Ohio, the midpoint, and discovers the stories of grandparents that he never met. Taking this knowledge to Virginia, Milkman discovers Solomon's defining act in the Dead family history. He realizes that powerful Pilate needs this knowledge and risks his life to bring it to her. This surprising nephew becomes a saving grace for the aunt who was an essential teacher. Knowledge is imparted between genders and generations.

In *Song of Solomon*, the search for African American roots leads to the recovery of painful family memories of white supremacist persecution and violence. Despite the positive rhetoric of the closure, which describes Milkman's epiphany moment of racial flight and pride in his Black roots, the fact that Milkman leaps into the waiting arms of Guitar suggests that this moment of heroic flight can also be read as a suicidal gesture. In an attempt to confront and reconnect with Guitar, Milkman leaps toward Guitar—and his own death, uttering his hard-won psychological truth: "if you surrendered to the air, you could ride it." Milkman's death brings the novel full circle, from the initial suicide. "flight" of insurance agent Robert Smith to the self-sacrificing "flight" by Milkman. Gary Storehoff argues that Morrison's novel "contrasts Macon Dead's and Ruth Foster's families of origin to reveal why they over involve themselves in Milkman's life, as they attempt to recapitulate childhood patterns in their own family" (Gary Storehoff: "Anaconda Love": Parental Enmeshment in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*." 291)

Milkman's parents who lived in the south under slavery and Reconstruction manifest the effects of these two kinds of racism in their dysfunctional relationships with each other and their children. The journey of the hero is taken from South to North, but Toni Morrison deconstructs and inverse the journey from North to South to search the legacy where the slaves settled first. As Morrison feels northern characters are deeply influenced by their past in the south. They carry the wounds of the past and these wounds are passed down to the next generation.

Milkman Dead grew up with the privilege of class status. Due to this he becomes ignorant of racial injustices. However, he is wounded by that history, as his parents retort one another to the wounds of that history. Milkman is provoked on a search for his ancestors out of a desire to escape his parents' lives. A search for family means a search for connection, identity, and history. However the final struggle between Milkman and Guitar is not characterized in the novel.

Macon Dead (Milkman's father) views family as merely another reflection of material wealth, and he is incapable of giving and receiving love. Milkman feels pressured to accept his father's love of ownership of things. Like his father, he views the family as an infirmary. He cannot distinguish between his mother and his sisters, and

he relates to his mother with thoughtlessness and indifference. Eventually, Milkman rejects his father's perspective and comes to embrace spirituality over material goods.

The novel evokes the history of black immigration and chain of economic confiscation from hinterland to village, from village to metropolis. The end point of Milkman's journey is the starting point of the black races' history in America. The long journey leads him back through his personal past to a racial history. *Song of Solomon*, therefore, marks a qualitative leap in Morrison's perception as an African-American woman writer. She is more aware of the dialectical relationship between capitalism, racism and sexism. The setting of the novel is at the Southside district in a city near Lake Superior; Danville, Pennsylvania; Shalimar, Virginia. The Narrator in the novel weaves in and out of different character viewpoints, beliefs, and psychologies.

The story of the novel is divided into three acts, first act is about Milkman's meeting with Pilate, the forbidden aunt, and learns about his father's past. Milkman's curiosity for his history is stirred, and he lays plans for his journey into the past. In the second act, Milkman and Guitar steal Pilate's green bag. The second act arrives after Milkman has abandoned his dream of goal in the pursuit of his family history. After an impossible search, he trips to a small town of Shalimar, Virginia where he suspects he has roots. Although he is so close to his history, the first thing he does when he enters the town is insulting all of the locals, thus temporarily sealing him off from the ancestry that ambushes around him. In third act Milkman and Pilate go to bury Jake's bones on Solomon's Leap, Milkman has already reached his goal of solving his family mystery. He has proved to himself that he can live and act independently through his journey. His ambiguous and complicated leap into the air at the end of the novel further highlights his sense of independence and empowerment. Toni Morrison identifies Milkman with the historical shaped meaning of blackness with his attainment of what W.E.B Du Bois calls "Self-conscious manhood". (*The Souls of Black Folk* 45)

Toni Morrison states why she has chosen Milkman as the central character of the Novel:

I choose the man to make that journey because I thought he had more to learn than a woman would have I started with a man, and I was amazed at how little men taught one another in the book. I assumed that all men ever learn about being men they get from other men. (Thomas, LeClair. *The Language Must Not Sweat: A Conversation with Toni Morrison* 123)

As Milkman travels from north to south, facing Circe and a bobcat hunt in the process, he symbolically sheds Western values through his loss of materials and materialism alike. Like his graveyard-lover Hagar Dead, who literally buys into the Anglo beauty myth with brand-name accessories and mango, red, and blue makeup, Milkman struggles to find not only his roots but also sources of love.

Milkman's class consciousness is just as weak as his race awareness. Believing in his father's capitalist philosophy, wealth is the goal of his life. K. Sumana rightly observes,

"Macon Dead's household is certainly a model of black capitalism.... His obsessive need for money and power, his desire to further himself are totally in tune with the ethos of the technologically advanced capitalist culture that surrounds him'. (The Novels of Toni Morrison: A Study in Race, Gender and Class, 83)

Milkman has little regard for the masses in the community. Consequently the people have little regard for him. To set up close tie with the community, Milkman has to liberate himself of the Macon Dead mentality and what is more, he must begin to love his people more than his money like Pilate who "gave up, apparently, all interest in table manners or hygiene, but acquired a deep concern for and about human relationships". (Morrison: *Song of Solomon*, 280) Toni Morrison identifies Milkman with the historical shaped meaning of blackness with his attainment of what W.E.B. Du Bois calls "Self-conscious manhood". (*The Souls of Black Folk* 45)

The story is divided into two parts, first part sketches the racial conditions in the Michigan City where Milkman is born around 1932, and it describes his experiences up to 1963, during his thirties. This part tells that Milkman enjoys the middle-class comforts his father has afforded to him, yet estranges from the present and oblivious of the past. His discontent of life makes him to take journey to the South is the saga of Part Two. Milkman finds his spiritual heritage in the Southern settings (Danville, Pennsylvania, and Shalimar, Virginia) crucial to his family's background.

At this point, Milkman focuses on two sustaining relationships, one is Guitar his schoolmate, and the other one is his aunt, Pilate's granddaughter, Hagar. As they start growing Guitar detach himself away from Milkman, and Milkman desires to break off his relationship with Hagar. Hagar obsessed with Milkman, threatens to kill him. At the end of the Part I Milkman gets frustrated with these broken relationships. The journey begins from the gap between Macon and Pilate. Macon believes that the gap between them took place decades earlier, Macon and Pilate escaped to South after his father's death, at that time Pilate stole a bag of gold from him. Now Milkman moves to south to restore this gold.

The novel thus has the common form of mystery, which reveals how Milkman discovers the missing gold. Part Two mainly consists of the attempts made by Milkman to identify the clues, to make out a coherent history of the missing gold. The two parts of the novel present the basic facts of the protagonist in terms of his community and family background. First Part tells about the current relationships with others and represents the present situation. Whereas second Part deals with the encounter of Milkman's incoherent fragmented stories told by others about his past ancestry.

Milkman never finds the missing gold but learns the past history of his ancestors. He also learns the responsibility and sacrifice. He assures to give half of the gold to Guitar, to finance the political terrorism. Guitar feels Milkman has betrayed him, so he continuously tries to slay his childhood friend but accidently kills Pilate. Eventually Milkman and Guitar gets locked in physical struggle. Toni Morrison exposes the central

issue of 'existential freedom' through the flight of Solomon in *Song of Solomon*. Existential freedom advocates the individual responsibility to intend to plan one's path of life and be a pilot of his/ her life. Milkman realizes this responsibility at the time of Pilate's death. "For now he knew what Shalimar knew: if you surrendered to the air, you could ride it" (Morrison: *Song of Solomon*, 337).

This is the estrangement which provoked Milkman to go in search of self identity and family history. His search takes him with awareness, ethics and a sensitive realization of the blacks. He sympathizes at the mind set and life of the black people. His life becomes mystified whether to live like his father, a ruthless and successful landlord who pursues only the accumulation of wealth or lives like Pilate by designing his own life.

Henry Porter the other tenant Macon Dead and Corinthians eventually budge together as lovers solidarity between genders is represented in the characters of Porter and Milkman's sister, First Corinthians. Her name is adopted from the title of a New Testament book where sex is destined and slaves must endure their masters.

First Corinthians' challenge is to consider her identity and assumptions of herself, her family and an improbable suitor. At the beginning of the novel Porter appears to be a foul-mouthed, urinating, shotgun-toting drunken and later re-introduced as a mild-mannered, blue-collar gentleman "not wanting a doll-baby, but a woman" (Morrison: *Song of Solomon*, 196). Corinthians faces an identity crisis by entering the servant's door. Her secret love affair with Porter coincides with her bus substitute to a housekeeping job for an unmarried, white lady poetess, Michael-Mary Graham.

The apparition of sexual possession (Hagar) and material possession (Guitar) in contrast to the struggle shared among the families is successfully passed on. Milkman succeeds in his major trial. A liberating romance, with a local woman called Sweet, proves Milkman can apply the lesson of Porter and Corinthians. He is ready for a Meeting with the Goddess. Campbell describes such a figure: "Woman, in the picture language of mythology, represents the totality of what can be known. The hero is the one who comes to know" (Campbell: *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 106).

Milkman recognizes what he expected all through his life: "he deserved to be loved" Morrison's perception of history as "re-memory," a move toward the history is not as a series of important community events that are noticeable by wars and other national predicaments but as an anthology of stories filtered through the individual memories.

Finally, when Milkman returns to Michigan to inform Macon Jr. and Pilate about his discovery, he finds that Hagar has died of a broken heart and understands that the poignant problems cursing his family did not end. At the end of the novel, Milkman recognizes that Guitar "needs" his life and he affirms his willingness to give it. He shouts to him, "You want my life? You need it? Here." He plunges toward Guitar, knowing that "if you surrendered to the air, you could ride it" (Morrison: *Song of Solomon*, 337). Toni

Morrison does not allow readers the comfort of certainty. Milkman is incapable to flourish either spiritually or emotionally until he acknowledges, recognizes, and retrieves his relation to the past. Milkman's journey elucidates the significance of the past and cultural self and his liability to reconnect the loose historical cords of his memory. It suggests that in this process he must re-remember the historical cords.

Toni Morrison sends her hero Milkman through different stages into a heritage that is common to all black families in America. Morrison divulges that she is obliged to the oral tradition of the blacks which she feels is strong and alive in black culture. The struggle of blacks for existence creates the history and myths are narrated through stories which illustrate the past of blacks.

Milk man transcends both his humanity and mortality and attains God like stature. His search for identity involves recognizing and overcoming his dependence and emotional isolation through assimilation of his familial narrative. Milkman completed the stages of a hero's journey. Morrison through her exposition of Milkman's transformation establishes the centrality of ancestral narrative and of the achievement of individual self-affirmation and an authentic identity within her fictional work.

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