



Family History and Black Cultural Heritage in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon

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Abstract ;

The aim of this article is to discuss and analyze the impact of the Dead family history in the construction and the preservation of the memory of the black race as a whole. The power of memory in resuscitating the vitality of a collective past in the life of the African American community whose cultural heritage is plagued by the burden of racism, classism and sexism is investigated in this article. In fact, the author shows that in spite of the white man's attempt to 'wipe it out', African American culture and spiritual heritage survived in the minds and memories of its people. The workings of this cultural legacy came to characterize many aspects of the daily life of the African American communities whose collective effort at solidarity and unity paid off despite the challenge of the racist and classist forces that threatened them from the inside and the outside. Toni Morrison has always maintained her interest in the solidification of the relationship between the individuals and the community to ensure the preservation and the continuation of the race and the black folklore as this study demonstrates through the incorporation of myth, past, culture and black historical heritage. In fact, it is only when Milkman understands his family history and reconciles with his Southern roots that he is enabled to reach self-knowledge and collective acceptance of his newly formed race conscious identity.

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1. Introduction

African American Literature has generally been defined as a subject encompassing a large number of writings produced about people of African descent living in the United States of America. These people of African descent were brought to the USA through the Middle Passage; a route that took the formerly free Africans to the land of the free and the fair just to finish as slaves whose humanity and dignity were obliterated through racial invisibility and alienation. Conscious of the necessity and the importance of keeping one's ties with their original culture and folk tradition, the Black slaves, then newly identified African American people incorporated the vast cultural and historical background that constituted their African identity constructs to the reality of their daily American life through its oppression and all the way through resistance to the forces of race, class and gender discrimination.

African American literature relied on a counter discourse to the white essentialist discourse that denied black the black race in America its dignity and its humanity to better exploit it. Defined by the white reductionist stereotypes under the oppressive forces of racism, classism and sexism, the black characters, which we encountered in American Literature, were portrayed as marginal, weak, ignorant and ready for subservience under the order of white hegemony. African American literature came to redress black identity politics from negation and invisibility to

presence and positivity. Toni Morrison is among the many African American intellectuals, critics, social activists and writers who addressed the issue of being black in the USA from the early days of the Middle Passage on. Through her career and the panoply of works, mainly novels, that she offered the world, Toni Morrison's ineffable effort at dealing with black culture and identity under the forces of oppression, summarizes her entire career as a black female writer, and a literary and social critic. Her efforts and those of a large number of black intellectuals and writers have proven successful in reclaiming and maintaining a place in the sun for African American literature and culture. Alongside the stories of her people's struggle against racism, classism and sexism, Toni Morrison has also focused on African American stories of resistance to the forces of oppression that had forced the fixity of black American identity through dehumanization, alienation and exploitation.

Conscious of the repercussions of race, class and gender discrimination in the

weakening of black identity and a planned obliteration of black culture and folk by the white racist hegemony, Toni Morrison weaved on her literary competence to denounce the inequalities and the injustices of the white world that granted privilege and power to the whites only. In *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Toni Morrison's centrality of the black character and black culture is evoked and defended against the

devaluation that essentialism has imposed. The objective of this iconic work of criticism was to “turn white criticism on its head, instead of seeing African American as on the margins of the literary canon, the American literary tradition (is) seen as centered upon them” (Peach 1995, p.84).

In order to deconstruct the fixity and the invisibility of the black communities that she describes in her works, Toni Morrison always incorporates the black community as a collective body that is composed of individuals who either evolve under its precepts or derive from them its exigencies. She shows that any such acts of resistance to the orders of the community is interpreted as an act of desertion from the general well-being of the group. In fact, "in each of her narratives, a community functions as a moral arbiter, the source of both individual and group norms. Her characters are defined in part through collective presumptions." (Gates&Appiah, 1993:146.) The movement that often occurs within the community is the result of a desire to evolve, progress and change. These impulses are not always tolerated by the community, which resent any such individual breaking their usual ‘fixed’ societal and economic codes. Toni Morrison denounces the essentialist discourse that denies black history and culture as part and parcel of the larger American literary and cultural landscape. What is the role of the community and how does it define relationships and role distribution of its individuals? How do they both labor to reclaim and repossess

what these oppressive forces have ‘usurped’ from them by a due process of a colonized/colonizer dichotomy when one may define this relationship as “the most serious blow suffered by the colonized (who) is removed from history and from the community” (Memmi 2003p.135).

The aim of this article is to discuss and analyze the impact of history and the memory of the past in the life of the African American community whose cultural heritage is plagued by the burden of racism, classism and sexism. In fact, the author shows that in spite of the white man’s attempt to ‘wipe it out’, African American culture and spiritual heritage survived in the minds and memories but also came to characterize many aspects of the daily life of the African American communities whose collective effort at solidarity and unity paid off despite the challenge of the racist and classist forces that threatened them from the inside and the outside. Ultimately, as we will demonstrate through this analysis, the novel ends with Milkman Dead reclaiming the culture of his people. We will try to answer the following concerns: How does Toni Morrison represent history and culture in *Song of Solomon*? How does it help the main character of the novel, as the focal character of this analysis, reach self-consciousness through which he fully comes to terms with the double consciousness that plagued his life? What are the aspects of the African cultural heritage that Toni Morrison tackles in *Song of Solomon*? To what extent does she rely on it as the promoter of individual sense of racial and cultural belonging?

What is the nature of the role that is played out by the black community?

This article also explores and investigates black resistance strategies against the forces of oppression and how the “broader community impacts on one’s conception of ‘self’ in the ‘racialized’ sense” (Gandal 2007p.58). The community acts like the guardian of the collective way of life with all its aspects, which pertain to the exercise of the rituals of their daily life. This brings us to consider a definition of folklore whose importance and influence is thought to be the basis of the survival of the community. In fact, folklore is “the expression of community of the common experiences, beliefs, and values that identify a folk as a group.” (Blake, 1980p.77). Toni Morrison has always maintained her interest in the solidification of the relationship between the individuals and the community to ensure the preservation and the continuation of the race and the folklore.

Our study is divided into two main sections. Section one is labeled: Family history, collective memory and the past in Song of Solomon where we analyze the impact of black physical migration, naming, and flight in the way they contribute to the definition and maintenance of the Dead family history and its constant desire to preserve a historical

standpoint whereby black identity is defined in Song of Solomon. The second section is labeled: the Deads and black cultural heritage: spatial and temporal

challenges. This section will address the importance of collective history as a conveyor of family history in Song of Solomon. We will determine the vital role of the black community as a keeper and guardian of the Dead family history.

1. Family History, collective memory and the past in Song of Solomon

The present study focuses on Song of Solomon, written in 1976 by Toni Morrison, and discusses how the ‘historical’ heritage of these people is presented and expressed in the literature of the African American community in the mid 1970’s. Song of Solomon could be typified as a black novel, which is “characterized by rhythm, the presence of the ancestors, the openness to discredited knowledge and to the magic and mystery of the body, and the restraint or reverse of the novelist as well as the novel’s open-endedness,” (Khayati 1999 p. 163). Set in the 1960’s historical and cultural context, the novel uncovers new cultural representations related to the Afro-American community which seems to be torn between a ‘mythical’ inherited tradition of a past that the white man had tried to erase, and a newly adopted materialistic and individualistic present, characterized by a quest for wealth and better economic situation. As a matter-of-fact, “...for Morrison historical changes such as black migration to urban spaces, assimilation into the middle class, and acculturation to western values have threatened the old values that once gave cultural coherence to black people’s lives. She feels that her novel (s) can address those changes.” (Moblely,1994, p.95). In

Song of Solomon, the author “retrieves early African American culture from the oblivion, a culture deliberately maneuvered into erasure by the dominant group of society.” (Mori, 1999p. 50.)

In fact, there is a necessity to consider one’s history and a better knowledge of one’s identity. That is one of the author’s main objectives. What is the place of history? How the African American characters of the story regard it. How do they approach it? How does history affect culture and how does culture affect history? These are issues that are discussed in the next sections, that is history, memory and the past, physical movement and historical continuity and/or discontinuity, flight and its mythical dimension; naming and singing in the African American community; also other issues are highlighted such as the culture of the African American people, tradition versus modernity in a struggle for identity and matriarchy versus patriarchy in search of African roots.

In Song of Solomon, history is given a mythical dimension that transcends the hands of time and place to remain one of the most important imports of cultural and individual identity. History is also used to eradicate the reductionist stereotypes that are attached to both black males and female characters in the dawn of a new African American culture revived from the wounds of a slave past and clearly seeking reconciliation between its members. Toni Morrison’s stories in general, represent a return to origins; they are not only rooted in nostalgia for the past but also seem to induce the characters towards embracing the reality through the

changes and the challenges of their present American life. In fact, those narratives “ represent a process for **coming to grips** with historical transition” (Gates, 1984, p.26). She relies on facts and events that are not the product of her imagination; she instead focuses on very important turning points in the history of the African American Cultural heritage that she praises and raises in her works. The novel involves an interest in the resuscitation of the black cultural heritage, which will allow Milkman’s fragmented racial, and classist identity to take shape through a return to the land of his ancestors.

In the novel, black history takes the form of myths, motifs and references through which the author shows the importance of the past and its aspects in the construction of an Afro-American identity. These appear to signify neither rejection nor re-appropriation of the Afro-American community. Accordingly, in the novel, myth and myth-making spring from “the intense need for the expression of spirituality reflected in the continuity of beliefs transported from Africa.” (Zauditu-Selassie, 2008 p.1.) Thus, recalling, recounting and telling are part of the oral tradition of the African-American community that the black communities of Shalimar and Danville labor to preserve. It is also this memory of pain and grief that accompanies the very act of remembering that strengthens the individual sense of belonging to the race. In fact, when one says history, one means memory, the memory of the past. In the novel, the past is discarded by characters like Macon

Dead Senior who denies its importance in resisting the forces of oppression that codified black life and condemned it through racist internalization to intra-racial divisions and tensions within the black community.

The relationship between the individual and the community is explored and examined in *Song of Solomonto* determine its nature and how it operates in establishing an order that refutes and counters the forces of race, class and gender oppression. The black community in *Song of Solomon* seems to be prey to struggle against the invisibility and the fixity that white racism has imposed on them. In fact, “*Song of Solomon* focuses on the Sixties, when neighborhoods are perceived from the outside and called ghettos, a time of urban black political activism and general counter-cultural awareness”(Gates, 1984, p.265). In the novel, the black community in the North seems to fight hard to survive the discrimination and the prejudice of being black and condemned to poverty. The economic stativity of the Black community of Southside seems to lead to intra-racial tensions and divisions.

In *Song of Solomon*, the black community is prey to racial divisions, which result from racism, classism and sexism. The black community in the novel is determined by geographical location and the prevalent socio-economic circumstances, which help in the framing of black individual identity. Accordingly, “the community as the source of racial empowerment and gatherings of the characters are employed in much the same

manner as the chorus of Greek drama.” (Mori, 1999: 103.) Actually, the life and the actions of the individual characters are constantly weighed and judged by the power of the community. The latter plays the role of the arbiter of the moral, socio economic daily routine. In fact, the black community is divided into two very conflicting ideologies as a response to the black northern capitalist order and the one which appears to be more in touch and for the preservation of the black cultural heritage, I name here, the black community of Danville and Shalimar.

Indeed, in the light of the opposing northern and southern way of life, the novel shows juxtaposition between the life of Macon Dead and the one Pilate chooses instead. On the one hand, Pilate clings to the memory of her family and her ancestors that she is ready to pass on to her nephew Milkman, whereas Macon Dead seems to completely reject family and collective memory that he associates with race and class oppression. There is antagonism on the part of her brother who seems to reject his sister and deny any possible link with her for the sole reason that she refuses to conform to her brother’s patriarchal designs. Macon Dead and his sister represent the author’s different ideologies, which seemingly appear to be the purveyors of a range of new historical and cultural representations, as it is discussed later in this article. Conversely, Pilate Dead respects and preserves the past of her family which she plans to pass on to Milkman, her nephew whose racial and class consciousness have been altered by

the weight of white capitalist patriarchal values which represent his father's racial self-loathing. In the novel, the past is addressed with mixed feelings of pride and shame. The name of Jake Solomon the newly freed slave becomes Macon Dead. Jake Solomon accepts the new name for it was thought it was going to ensure a brand new beginning for the family, away from slavery and its shameful repercussions. Jake Solomon's new name is liked by his wife who thinks it "...was new and would wipe out the past. Wipe it all out." (Morrison, 1976 p.53.) In other terms, Macon Dead becomes Jake Solomon's new name. It is accepted despite its controversial significance more because it was going to erase the 'slave' past from the memory of Jake Solomon and his Indian bride: Sing.

In fact, the changes that occur in terms of history and culture are being reflected through the characters of the novels: their understanding and reliance on history and culture is reflected through the different ideologies, which seem to contribute to the making of their identity. In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison clearly addresses issues of culture, history, race, gender and identity. Actually, Toni Morrison characterizes Milkman Dead as a character who is "unable to progress spiritually or emotionally until he acknowledges, recognizes, reclaims his connection to the past...to reestablish continuity with the past in order to create the sense of identity necessary for healthy survival." (Gillespie, 2008p.172.) Milkman's regressive nature is linked to the incompatibility of his Bourgeois

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The novel addresses memory and its importance in the life of the individual and that of the community as a whole. To move forward one has to consider one's past since "the past is a necessary part of the present self, their stories need to be acknowledged so that living possibilities may be conceived. Yet an immersion into the past can also create stagnation and distortion, and may diminish or deny living possibilities." (Bryce Bjork, 1996p. 145.) In *Song of Solomon*, the past is addressed to emphasize the necessity to keep one's ties with their origins to be able to resist the forces of capitalist changes, which result in racial divisions. In honoring the past of his grandfather,

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Memory allows individual identity to take shape. It also reinforces the sense of communal unity in the face of oppression in all its forms. Zauditu-Selassie (2008p.149.) writes that "memory, a phenomenon of primary importance in oral tradition, becomes a political, spiritual, and cultural statement...Transmitted from generation to generation through the use of traditional oral forms, this shared knowledge assures spiritual and cultural continuity." Actually, in order to recover the memory of his ancestors' life and to be able to give

its true significance, Milkman must journey back to the South, which holds the secret to the recovery of his usurped identity. Thus, Milkman "journeys from spiritual death to rebirth, a direction symbolized by his discovery of the secret power of flight. Mythically, liberation and transcendence follow the discovery of the self."(Evans, 1983 p.353). Even if Milkman had started from "a point of restriction that comes from separation (thanks) to the knowledge of his family's past and his place in the community, Milkman (is able) to ascend rather than conventionally to fall through knowledge." (Ibid, p.45.)

Time and place are interrelated in the novel. They are endowed with physical and mythical significance. Milkman's journey is a physical one in space, which earns him self- discovery and a better knowledge of himself and his ancestors' identity. It is "a journey through history and myth", crowned by self-realization, and self-hatred seems to have disappeared from the man's vocabulary. Additionally, one may argue that this notion of temporality and spatiality affects the workings of memory and the process of memorization where "time becomes 'space': all the recollected past exists simultaneously in the same 'place.'" (Fabre & O'Meally, 1994p. 171). Despite the change of time, places keep track of the memories of the past that are relieved via re-memory. The pursuit of materialism disrupts the meaning of black family and community and becomes the leading factor in Macon Dead's estrangement with his sister Pilate. (Song of Solomon, p, 25.) He furthers his newly

established hatred for Pilate by criticizing who she is, what she has become and the life she has, even if he has been caught having a sneak look at her cabin in a manner that could be interpreted as nostalgia. Ironically enough, when Milkman and Guitar are arrested for breaking into her house, Macon's so-called riches could not get him out of jail; if it were not for Pilate's interference, Macon's son would have spent time in jail.

Accordingly, Toni Morrison's Milkman's character construction depicts him as having the life of an irresponsible son to a Middle class black family whose racial hatred results in the black community's internal antagonisms. Milkman Dead is an ambivalent character who evolves between past and present; between the power of money that his father has instilled in him and that of the ancestors that allows him to make peace with himself, and the community. That life of perdition, which made him disregard, devalue the feelings of the people whom he encounters, is the reason why he has to undertake a journey back to the roots of his own ancestors. Actually, "Milkman acquires a sense of identity when he immerses himself in his extended past. He comes full circle from the individualism his father represents and advocates." (Furman,2003 p.40.) Pilate Dead is the character most attached to his ancestors. Alongside her efforts to ensure a household that is more based on subsistence than any 'modern' means of survival, the protagonist keeps close to the past by symbolically holding on to her bag of bones. Instead of "repressing the past,

she carries it with her in the form of her songs, her stories, and her bag of bones." (Ibid,p. 37). That bag, instead of carrying gold as the male Dead thought, proved full of her father's remains.

2.1 Black migration and family history: continuity and/or discontinuity

The 'cultural' representations as expressed in African American literature in general and in Morrison's fiction in particular constitute a turning point in the history and culture of the Afro- Americans as these representations were bred within a cultural continuity and/ or discontinuity which resulted from their migration from the South to the North in search of a better future. Morrison suggests that the only way those characters can survive the dislocation of place is by keeping their history with them. The example of Pilate carrying the 'bag of bones' is a clear illustration of the African Americans carrying with them the whole 'load' of their history and memory. Ironically, Pilate carries the bag without ever knowing that the latter held her father's remains. Time and place are interrelated in the novel with the significance and importance they seem to represent for the individual, that is his past and present. Milkman's journey is a physical one in space but it earns him self-discovery and a better knowledge of himself and his ancestors' identity.

Change and continuity are part of a person's life, how much one rejects and how much one keeps determines one's identity. Memory is a way to keep tradition that is passed on from generation to generation thus becoming the race's cultural legacy. In the novel, while Pilate

respects the spiral import that she gets from her ancestors, her brother Macon rejects all links with that 'hateful' part of his past because it is too heavy to move within a world where money goes fast. In the novel, these characters are represented by the Dead dynasty whose lives are being determined by the oppressive forces of racism, classism and sexism. Here we will address the repercussions of black migration to the North in the way it maintains or rejects black history of the Dead family. As a result of slavery whose major plan was to ensure the erasure of black identity and culture, the African slaves had to challenge the exploitation and the discrimination that they were subject to at the hands of the white supremacist and capitalist ideology by spiritually and emotionally maintaining their link with their native culture and land. "Yet, maintaining cultural discontinuity was difficult and fraught with many sacrifices and adaptations. It is well documented by the facts that the drum was outlawed, names were changed, and many traditional practices had to be adapted." (Zauditau-Selassie,2008p.1.) These black cultural adjustments had to be concealed from white knowledge by the slaves who feared repressive actions against them. This clearly added to the frustration and the anguish of the blacks whose social and economic fractured condition demanded wiping out their past. The movement from South to North is an example of cultural discontinuity which the newly freed blacks had undertaken, very often without the slightest knowledge that it would signal the end of their 'native' culture. Conversely, the

movement from North to South will help Milkman achieve who he really is: a dignified black person who becomes proud of being black. Toni Morrison addresses the issue of losing one's true identity as a consequence of acculturation. The author warns against the danger of that denial of the past. As a matter of fact, it is "through the tenacious practice of culture Africans endured in America: this worldview bears witness to the strength of the survivors of one of the cruelest systems of human oppression witnessed in human history." (Zanditu-Selassie,2008 p.1).

It is a sudden and unplanned return to the roots of his family, which, although it had started rather badly, ended in knowledge and acceptance of who he is and where he comes from. Milkman's journey "takes him physically from the urban North through a progressively rural and southern landscape to the home of his ancestors in Shalimar, Virginia." (Furman,2003 p .44). This is a clear instance of change and discontinuity when a very important part of one self is relegated to forgetfulness. The grandfather started his way from zero in a new setting, among people whom he knew nothing about at that time. There are clear social and economic discrepancies between the North and the South as portrayed by the author to show that the South's lack of materialism is the purveyor of race and gender harmony. Though belonging to the North, the Deads are not exempt from feeling marginalization and alienation. The North as the site of power and success does not seem to provide any sense of pride anymore. In Song of Solomon, "the

neighborhood...defines a northern social mode rather than a southern one, for it describes the relationship of an economic satellite, contiguous to a larger metropolis rather than separate, subsistence economies like the Southern rural towns of Shalimar.” (Gates, 1984.p271).

The young Milkman becomes aware of the futility of his parents’ northern and urbanized education. The North represents a state of constant alienation and marginalization that furthers his sense of loss. There, he could only be dead to the knowledge necessary for his maturity. The connotation of the name that he acquires takes full significance among the Southside community that hates him for his arrogance and indifference towards them. In the North, he sees them as property, a possible commodity, a way to exert and exercise his love of money and power. Milkman’s race consciousness develops neither with his father nor in the company of Guitar, as both represent two divergent and radical visions of the significance of race and class oppression and the means that are needed to reach empowerment. Hence, “Milkman’s growth on his journey is measurable. He changes from a self-centered, middle-class born to a man genuinely able to share in a physical relationship as well as in societal and communal interchanges.” (Harris,1991,p.21).

In the North, despite the prosperous condition that he enjoys, the young man feels much alienation on the part of the community, which regards him as a peacock whose feathers weigh down so heavily. He is also alienated by the Bourgeois patriarchal capitalist value

systems which make him value people as commodity even the closest and most devoted among them. To achieve his racial consciousness, the young man has to strip off the assets of his ‘new’ Bourgeois upbringing which have made his understanding of race, gender and class relationships emotionally and physically crippled.

The discrepancy between the Northern landscape that Milkman is accustomed to and the Southern one that he is brought to discover is pertinent in the Southern rejection of individualism and capitalist attributes. This makes Shalimar and Danville highly adhere to the episteme of a “racialized community (that) is a shelter from racism and violence.” (King,2002p.111.) In fact, in the South, Milkman is initiated to a rite whose success confirms his manhood and official belonging to the community and the race. The attributes of the capitalist patriarchal and sexist values are incompatible in the South for they only ensure and reinforce racial divisions from within, in addition to societal divisions within the black community. In order to reach race consciousness, Milkman has to drop his class attributes, which weigh him down, and which Guitar compares to a peacock weighed down by the weight of his feathers. Here, Guitar speaks about Milkman’s class attributes that he inherited from his father and which in the long term become a burden for him, too heavy to carry for he has not chosen them. His southward journey to the land of white man’s gold turns out to be a tour where he acquires the true significance of who he is. In the South, “to his people, his materially

endowed superior airs are not adequate to justify his existence as a black man...In Shalimar, however, the skills to measure self-worth involve those raw emotions and survival skills” (Bryce, 1994.p.104).

2.2 Black present empowerment and the myth of the Flying African

The myth of the flying African is a central aspect of black identity formation in *Song of Solomon*. We will determine how it impacts black individual and collective identity politics under the forces of racism. In fact, the mythical and spiritual dimensions have always been part of the African cultural heritage through which the Africans explained and interpreted certain situations that involved the rituals of their daily life. Upon their arrival in the New World, and pushed by awareness of being cut off from their native land and culture, the Africans relied on the use of the same folktales and the funk which they tried hard to pass on to the successive generations despite the workings of capitalist slavery and racism to obliterate the African heritage from the minds and the lives of these Africans. Undoubtedly, “the intense need for the depression of spirituality reflected the continuity of beliefs transported from Africa.” (Zauditu-Selassie, 2008,p.1).

Toni Morrison repeatedly uses such myths whose very existence relies on the fabulous dimension that they provide to the people, which circulate them. The myth of the flying Africans has always been part of black folklore: this myth often circulated among the Africans who, upon their arrival in America, never lost faith in a possible return to their native land from which they were uprooted.

Thus, “the myth of the flying Africans tells of Africans who escaped the slave trade by flying from slave ships during the Middle Passage.” (Beaulieu, 2003p.19). In *Song of Solomon*, we encounter the resuscitation of the flight myth as a resistance strategy to the forces of oppression that negate black rights for freedom. Conversely, “ these types of absolute freedoms through flight are problematic because they involve the denial of personal and social bonds.” (Bryce Bjork, 1996p, 107.)

In *Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison addresses the myth of the flying Africans in the opening and at the end of the novel through the character of Mr. Smith. A victim of racial and classist oppression, the alienated black man commits what seems to be more like suicide. In the minds and the hearts of the black people who attended the scene, Mr. Smith’s death became an attempt at flying back to freedom of the self and the mind. However, his tragic fall and failed flight is symbolic of the impossibility to flee the black man’s marginalized condition. The black people of Southside believed in the success of Mr. Smith’s flight as they believed in the myth, which they thought would work. The second most significant attempt at flying or so it seemed occurs during Milkman’s final altercation with Guitar. Overwhelmed with grief at his aunt’s murder, the only woman who had the power to make him believe in flight and flying, Milkman became at last conscious of the importance of his life, Pilate, as Milkman notes, is able to fly without ever lifting her feet off the ground. She has mastered flight, managing

to be free of subjugation without leaving anyone behind with her support and growing sense of altruism. Flight here may suggest knowledge and the transcendence of the present to a past mythical dimension whose historical and cultural import can only help Milkman reach a complete racial identity of which he becomes proud. Morrison's extensive use of flying is literal and metaphorical at the same time with all its meanings and connotations ranging from quest, discovery, knowledge, journey to acceptance of knowledge of both family and community past.

In fact, Toni Morrison relies on the use of such a myth because, as Beaulieu (2003 p.87) rightly states, "folklore comes out of and expresses a particular community...this folktale of the flying Africans underscores the importance of community to African American identity, because it helps create a group identity." The flight as it first appears in the opening of the novel and which ends with the death of Mr. Smith does not have to be seen as surrender or abandonment to the circumstances of life. It can be seen as a willingness to reach out to that far past when freedom meant a lot. For Mr. Smith, that mythical flight of the first Solomon had transcended the hands of time to become an essential need, really for one to have peace. Rite as initiation is part of the novel's mythical dimension; it is related to the far past, to the African past when ancestors made young men go through a rite to declare them adults. Hunting and swimming are two other components of this quest of truth which allow Milkman to acquire maturity and the respect of his

people, the town people of Shalimar in Virginia.

2.3 Naming as a symbol of oppression and resistance

Naming has always been an issue for the blacks in America at the time of slavery and segregation. Naming as a motif that contributes to black identity construction and preservation is a major concern in the novel. In fact, the denial of slave names as a marker of black resistance to oppression is explored and analyzed in the novel in its contribution to the making of black individual and collective identity that reaches back to a long forgotten past which relates them to their African past. Through name and naming, Toni Morrison "examines the broader cultural genealogy, in order to search for African American roots for it weren't for the knowledge of a past...it would be extremely difficult for an African American to know why he or she exists and who he or she is." (Mori, 1999p, 47.) In *Song of Solomon*, naming becomes either a symbol of oppression or resistance to the forces of white discrimination. Black people evolve with the perceptible difficulty to keep their 'original' names as the white man used to impose on them a 'slave' name, which aimed at erasing all ties with who they were originally. Accordingly, "rather than fixing the bounds of character, in Morrison, naming usually plays a dynamic role in shaping identity. The attribution of a name opens the possibility of a double-entendre, of ambiguity in the character's definition." (Harding & Martin, 1994p,19.) Actually, for the blacks, naming and renaming becomes a symbol of emancipation and

ownership of one's self while for the white racists, naming and misnaming become the 'appropriate' way to erase them personally and get rid of the identity of the black people that the whites kept under their domination. Namelessness has always been synonymous with 'identity'-less or inexistence. In the novel, Toni Morrison deals with this issue in a rather mythical, biblical way. However, the biblical connotation that the names bear in the novel exempts the Dead family members from any possible religious faith of practice. In fact, these names serve the ornamental purpose of a symbolic significance they originally seem to lack. Toni Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon* starts with the following epigraph: "the fathers may soar/ and the children may know their names." This epigraph to the novel includes all the ingredients necessary for Milkman's journey to reach his personal awareness, which will enable him to reconcile with his anxious self. Milkman's later understanding and appropriation of his ancestor's name: Solomon after which the black town of Shalimar is named is testimony of the power of its legacy. The name which is part of the song that Pilate has sung all her life, is also part of the folklore that Shalimar has kept going on as a vital contribution to the immortalization of the 'Dead' man's 'he' story. Unarguably, Sugar man's song becomes a vital component of the bearer of the name 'Solomon' whose individual story transcends time and space into becoming a 'collective' symbol of resistance to oppression in all its forms. Thus, in *Song of Solomon*, "the acquisition of a name

marks the individual's birth into society ...that characterizes existence in the black community. " (Harding & Martin 1994p,21.)

Ultimately, by defending Pilate against Guitar's murderous greed, Milkman emphasizes the importance of the past and the necessity to bow to the sacrifice of his ancestors. At the end of the novel, Milkman becomes aware of his belonging to the black race as he reclaims his right for flight. Milkman's journey is seen as a rite of initiation that allows him to know more about his origins and the past that it holds. Mori (1999p. 54) stresses, " the discovery of one's name is essential to the discovery of identity; names and naming function in the development of awareness of one's embodied self and his/her relation to the past."

Likewise for naming is used as a trope of collective identity construction in the novel. As a symbol of resistance to the oppressive forces of racism and capitalism, the black community of Southside inverts names of places that are officially given by the whites. These inversions are understood to be "emblems of the black community's resistance to the white culture's negation of its world." (Gates, 1995,p.150) . Toni Morrison gives her characters names of biblical figures endowed with a wide range of significances that emanate from the world of the living and the "mythical" world of the "Dead." Considering Milkman's family to be alive can also mean to be dead, where the name springs. According to Furman(2003,p .46), "Morrison compares them to epic heroes whose experience transcends cultural and

temporal boundaries.” It is worth emphasizing that the problem of naming and being named has always been part of the African American reality. Names are endowed with both positive and negative connotations as there is a symbolism attached to names. It seems that changing a name may erase the trauma and subjection from one’s mind, and wiping out the past may be either a blessing on someone or a curse.

2.4 Singing in the African American community

In *Song of Solomon*, singing is a means of maintaining a link with a forgotten family history. Singing and songs were and still are part of the African American heritage. The opening of the novel with a song that is performed by Pilate is in fact “her song of resignation and response to her conditions as other.” (Morrison, 2003 p.64). Singing is a way to assert who the black people are in the midst of all the atrocities that the white men made them go through. In the past, songs were the only form of acknowledgement of suffering and pain. In the recent past, they came to be identified with the “gospel”, a form of cultural heritage. In a community where most of the past generations were illiterate and left to struggle against poverty, songs became the means through which collective memory is maintained. In *Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison pays tribute to those individuals like Pilate who understood the importance of African folk tradition in the reclaiming of an African American identity but also of the vitality of linking the uncertainties of the present time of racial struggle to the resilience and the perseverance of past experience. Even

if most flights ended in tragedy, Toni Morrison stresses the importance of carrying on one's hope for a better tomorrow: a collective form of African - Americanness which reconciles past and present, young and old generations. Actually, songs record details about Milkman’s heritage and cause Milkman to research his family history.

By singing folk songs about Sugarman’s flight, Pilate recreates a past in which her ancestors shed the yoke of oppression. Her recreation of this past sustains the characters that live in the present. The song form is present in the opening of the novel as a reminder of one’s mythical past and in the end as a form of identity, to reach the dimension of family identity. There is also a wide range of different intermingling songs, which refer to the multitude of characters of all these songs. In the novel, we find two particularly distinct ones: “Pilate’s song of longing and generosity, together with Macon’s song of greed,(which) bequeaths to Milkman a song of knowledge and responsibility.” (Furman,2003p. 65).

The song that Pilate has sung all her life as a tribute and in memory of her ancestor Solomon becomes her own song: sugar girl song. Ultimately, the *Song of Solomon* that Milkman "reconstitutes commemorates his ancestors refusal to be owned...such passion for freedom must be tempered with concern for its effects on others." (Gates & Appiah, 1993:151.) The novel ends up with a song that Milkman sings in honor of her dead aunt: his mentor from this world/ the other world. Accordingly, the song that Milkman sings in tribute to his deceased aunt in

recognition of her efforts to pass on the legacy of his family history and the preservation of the black collective cultural importance in forging a stable and conscious racial where personal and collective interest are put side by side. Thus, “the final act of the novel indicates reconciling with and reclaiming a lost past or lost African home.” (Beaulieu, 2003p, 31.)

1. *The ‘Deads’ and black cultural heritage: spatial and temporal challenges.*

Song of Solomon (1977) is one of Toni Morrison’s early works of fiction, which earned her the Book Critic Circle Award in 1978. In the novel, the author deals with the issues of race, gender and class, alongside memory and culture. Her fiction is determined by history, which is subject to social and cultural events that are proper to the Afro-American community. Accordingly, on the nature of *Song of Solomon*, Furman writes: “Morrison explores the interplay between self-knowledge and social role... (she) does not provide her people with the option of living underground, in isolation, beyond community.” (2003, p, 27). Milkman Dead understands the meaning of his personal identity only when this is allowed to reach a wider social and collective dimension. In the novel there is a question over the validity of one's racial history and the worthiness of one's culture, that is, the African American cultural heritage.

In this section, we will analyze the cultural legacy of naming, signing, black migration and flight in the preservation of the Dead family history as a symbol of

black racial struggle. There is a clear transformation of certain roles and power structures and how they operate in the Afro-American community and these appear to affect the community in the emergence of two types of ‘cultural’ dichotomies: tradition versus modernity and matriarchy versus patriarchy. How this black cultural legacy is preserved amidst the changes and challenges of the present time: modernity and tradition; and in the light of the conflicting patriarchal order which Toni Morrison substitutes to with the power of the headed matriarchal triads.

In *Song of Solomon*, for Macon Dead, the black culture of the ancestors is self-alienating. The precept of a new materialistic world he adheres to makes him reject the tradition and the conservatism of the black race. In other words, he rejects that part of it which did not impel him with an identity. He seems to identify and lean to the world of materialism through which he can acquire a position in that society. Macon Dead is the representation of the new African American type. He appears individualistic and isolated from the rest of his community, which is for him the only possible way to remain safe and keep his distinguished stature. He does not want to be like his peers and refuses to be associated with them. In life as in business, he presents a very negative image of himself; he is a terrible thing to see. It is at that point of separation between the past and the present that Milkman stands. It is from where he begins, from “that hyper individuation that grows out of the American culture of

competition, capitalism and racism.” (Furman, 2003 p.44).

3.1 Tradition versus modernity: A struggle for identity

In the novel, there seems to be two different trends: tradition and modernity. In between, the younger characters appear to struggle for identity. Capitalism is an ideology that, as shown by the author, seems to hurt more than relieve the ones who identify with its exigencies. Macon Dead is trapped by the harshness, shallowness and insecure materialistic life that he achieves as a result of his adopting capitalism. He seems to be incapable of separating business from his private life and this situation results in a form of alienation and estrangement that he feels within his family. In opposition stands his sister Pilate who is completely different from him and seems to adopt everything that he rejects. She raises a family as a single woman: “Instead of repressing the past, she carries it with her in the form of her songs, her stories, and her bag of bones” (Ibid p.37). Pilate is an instance of individualism and community life whereas Macon Dead is a clear example of individuality.

The black community of Southside Illinois, just like Jake Solomon’s black neighbors, expresses pride about Dr. Foster’s success, because they see in him their own social uplift. His success is the race’s success. However, they do not value the achievements that Macon Dead reached for he expresses his hatred for the race and his abhorrence of the community’s poverty and economic sterility. Macon Dead prefers to assert his assimilation to the white culture than

express his true racial belonging. With self-proclaimed Bourgeois standards, Macon Dead and his family live in the part of town they call the ghetto, reminding them of their failure, for he clearly detaches and isolates himself from them.

Macon Dead senior chooses to follow a class-conscious life rather than a race conscious identity that is based on solidarity with the wider community. Through characters like Macon Dead, Toni Morrison stresses that race matters seem to have been bracketed for matters of economic and gender aspirations. Originally from the South, Macon Dead’s quest for money brings him northward. As Baillie(2013p. 114) remarks, “migration destroys any natural relationship to land or property...determined to seal his ownership of Chicago slums in legally sanctioned property transactions even if this means the eviction of his people.” Macon Dead therefore excels in the pursuit of material attributes that would make him forget the misfortune of being born black and turned poor. As Landry(1996p. 40) argues: Macon is “new to the middle class, found a way to shore up (his) status in the community,” leading to the founding of “brown middle class.” Macon’s movement to the North destroys his original understanding of the notion of pride and land.

In the South, Milkman is given the opportunity to consider how vain and futile his father’s teachings are. He learns how to reconsider the worth and the importance of the knowledge of “his poor Southern relations whom he originally sees through the lens of internalized

racism as the shameful and inferior Other.” (Bouson, 2000 p.58). Milkman’s quest for his aunt’s buried gold is the primary motive behind his journey back to the land of his ancestors whose existence he ignored until he came to meet the black people of Danville and Shalimar. Milkman moves from crude individualism to the heart and core of African American collective life where mythic significance and spiritual legacy lie awaiting a potential heir. Therefore, “Milkman begins...at the point of restriction that comes from separation, from the hyper-individualization that grows out of the American culture of competition, capitalism, and racism.” (Carr Lee, 1998: 110.) This journey ends with the young man’s achieved race consciousness. He finally becomes aware of the significance of family history when attached to black cultural heritage of which he becomes the new guardian. The other opposition which seems evident in the novel is between matriarchy and patriarchy, as is discussed in the next sub-section

3.2 Matriarchy versus patriarchy: Searching for ‘stable’ African Roots

Macon Dead is a good example of the patriarch who maintains his nuclear family stable, although the community has degenerated because of materialistic and individualistic values. Dr Foster and Macon Dead appear to perpetuate the exigencies of capitalist patriarchy which Rich (1986 p. 57) defines as: “ the power of the fathers: a familial, social, ideological system in which men (rule) by force, direct pressure,...and in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male.”

On the other hand, Pilate “ presides over a household which is predominantly female...her sheer disregard for status, occupation, hygiene, and manners enables her to affirm spiritual values such as compassion, respect, loyalty and generosity.” (Ibid,p.35) This seems to be inexistent in her brother’s household. This passage clearly shows that Pilate’s way of life is different from the Bourgeois attitudes that her brother Macon Dead opted for. Her life resembles the life of her ancestors and even if she had the money to make a better living, she was not interested in the pursuit of a better economic situation. In fact she has adopted the life of her ‘ancestors’ for its simplicity and its community-centered fulfillment.

There is a new form of gender bonding in the novel: it is no longer men and men versus women, but women and women for men. This is quite innovative considering the exigencies of a community, which did not surrender easily to any sense of resistance or aggressiveness on the part of women. Asked about her reliance on female triads or what is coined as three women households, Toni Morrison replied: “I got interested in a woman producing a woman producing a woman in a kind of non-male environment, and each generation has a different problem.” (Taylor Guntrie, 1994p.78). Against all odds, Pilate is the keeper of tradition. She is the one who refuses to let go of who she is and where she comes from. Besides, she chooses to found a household of which she would be in charge. Under her roof live three generations of women more or less alike in needs and desires. Thanks to

Pilate, there appears to be “(a) harmonious blending of the women’s voices...(which) is set in opposition to the strident, often silenced voices of the three women in her brother’s house.” (Morrison,2003.p65)

4. CONCLUSION

The aim of this article was to analyze the importance of family history as part of African American history and its contribution to the making of a stable black identity through cultural practice. The article focused on one of the most seminal works of fiction published in 1977 by the African American female writer Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*. The role of history and memory of the past, as well as other features such as naming, singing, culture, tradition, modernity, matriarchy and patriarchy, that she described throughout her novel in the construction, preservation of a black individual and collective identity are investigated and analyzed in the light of a vital relationship between the individual and the community, which both weave around common racial concern in the face of oppression in all its forms. The focal interest of the novel being the reclaiming and legitimization of a black history and culture which are part and parcel of black individual identity. Accordingly, Barbara Hill Rigney writes in: the *Voices of Toni Morrison* that the novel’s central point is “historic and its goal the rediscovery of an African past lost through slavery and perhaps irretrievable except through myth and then only at risk of life and sanity.” (Hill Rigney, 1991p,66.) The characters encounter a multitude of changes and

challenges which take them from the comfort zone of a past that is characterized by oppression in all its forms into a past, which, though they ignore and deny, has helped them, reach knowledge of themselves and their ancestors. Knowledge of one’s identity can only be if placed side by side with knowledge of one’s community.

Undeniably, *Song of Solomon* is the story of “the development of a historical and ethical awareness in the Bourgeois character of Milkman Dead.” (Grewal, 1998p.62) which could not have taken shape without his aunt’s mentorship. Thanks to Pilate, the guardian of female nurturing, Milkman would have not succeeded in reversing the capitalist and patriarchal teachings of his father that corrupted his perception and definition of the various power systems that he had access to. In fact, his privileged status derived him from truly considering any racial commitment vis a vis his family and the community’s history. To reach an economic stand does not determine who one is. It only fully happens when the characters recognize and accept the heritage of the past. As Gates(1993 p.281) remarks, “in his ancestors’ world, communal and mythical values prevail individualism and materialism; when he adopts their assumptions in place of his own, he arrives at a more complete understanding of what his experience means.” Milkman Dead acquires racial consciousness that paves the way to accepting and embracing his family and his community’s history. In the final instance, his leap symbolizes his return to the roots of his ancestors’ culture. He

reconstructs the meaning of blackness and regains the integrity of his culture owing to a large spiritual import that he could get from it.

The end of the novel typically expresses the hero's willingness to transcend his past as a slave whose trauma lies in the Dead fathers denial of its existence. Toni Morrison shows that Milkman has become aware of the importance of his aunt as the keeper of their family heritage. She is represented as an indispensable person: her presence in Milkman's life has become so important that he feels he could not carry on his life without her. He is even ready to sacrifice himself to prove that his life has become worth something at last. Milkman addresses Guitar in a daring tone when he tells him:

"You want my life? You need it? Here". Without wiping away the tears that he shed for the death of his aunt Pilate, his only guide to the world of his ancestors, Milkman "Taking a deep breath, or even bending his knees.. leaped. As fleet and bright as a loadstar he wheeled toward Guitar and it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother. For now he knew what Shalimar knew: if you surrender to the air, you could ride it." (Morrison, 1986 p.336).

Without willing it, Milkman unconsciously repeats the mythical Africans' flight that his ancestor had done before but instead of fleeing from his current life, Milkman is ready to defend it. Thanks to Pilate and his own unconscious person and endeavors to uncover a past thought dead, Milkman Dead succeeds in giving his life the meaning, which he

seemed to have lacked for years. At least, his life acquired a dimension that others like Guitar had come to envy. Milkman's life is no longer shallow and empty. It is no longer tainted by greed and ambition of the capitalist world of his time. His life is where the two dimensions of past and present are being reunited for the sake of community and solidarity. Milkman could not have reached this state without consolidating the past history and the memory of his ancestors with his own. Song of Solomon is Morrison's masterpiece in which she renders with brio the history and the culture of a community in constant struggle for the fulfillment of its own 'racial' and 'cultural' identity.

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