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## History and culture in Toni Morrison's *Song Of Solomon*

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### 1. Introduction

According to a definition, African American Literature is “the wide range of writings by people of African descent living in the United States of America. However, just as African American history and life is extremely varied, so too is African American literature.” (Wikipedia). African American literature differs from most post-colonial literature in that it is written by peoples of a minority community who live in a country of vast wealth and economic prosperity which is the United States of America.

My paper aims at showing the impact of history on the life of the African American community which, despite the white man's attempts to “wipe it out” survives in the minds and memories of these people. In addition, the paper focuses on how this “historical” heritage is presented and expressed in the literature of the African American community in the mid 1970's. In *Song of Solomon* for instance, 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. In the novel, the writer attempts to get rid of the “reductionist” stereotypes which are attached to both black male and female characters in the dawn of a new African American culture revived from the wounds of the past and clearly fed with the spirit of reconciliation between its members.

*Song of Solomon* (1977) is one of Morrison's early works of fiction which earned her the Book Circle Critic Award in 1978. In the novel, the author treats the issues of race, gender and class, alongside memory and culture. Morrison's fiction is determined by history which is subject to social and cultural events that are proper to the Afro- American community. In the novel there is a clear question over the validity of one's racial history and the worthiness of one's culture: i.e. African American cultural heritage.

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 the 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 himself discovery and a better knowledge of himself and his "ancestors" identity. It is "a journey through history and myth" crowned by self realization where self-hatred seems to have disappeared from man's vocabulary.

Morrison's stories represent a return to origins; they are not rooted in nostalgia for the past. Rather they represent a process for coming to grips with historical transition." (Gates, 1984: 264). 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. 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 is it regarded by the African American characters of the story? How do they approach it? How does history affect culture and vice versa is what we aim to show in this paper.

## **2. History in *Song of Solomon***

Born the son of Macon Dead Senior, and nephew of Pilate Dead, Milkman lives the life of a spoilt irresponsible son of a middle class black man. That life of perdition which made of him not value 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. In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison clearly addresses issues of culture, history, race, gender and identity. The changes which occur at the level of history and culture are investigated through the characters of the novels which, divided into three distinct groups, constitute the Dead dynasty.

Set in a new historical and cultural context, the novel uncovers new 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. The novel shows juxtaposition between the life of Macon Dead and the one that Pilate chooses instead. There is antagonism on the part of the 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. Those of course are not only his, but part of the traditional exigencies that are brought in by the Afro-American community. 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 is discussed later.

In the novel, history appears in 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 and these appear in the following signifying either rejection or reappropriation of the history of the Afro American community.

## **3. Memory and the Past**

Recalling, recounting and telling are part of the oral tradition of the African American community. Who says history means memory, the memory of the past. "liked it. Said it was new and would wipe out the past. Wipe it all out." (Morrison, 1986:53).

Change and continuity are part of a person's life, how much one rejects and how much one keeps. Memory is a way to keep tradition. While Pilate respects the spiritual import that

she gets from her ancestors, her brother Macon rejects all links with that “hateful” part of his past because too heavy to move with in a world where money goes fast. In the novel, “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: 40.)

Pilate Dead is the most attached to the past of her 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 a 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,37.) That bag, instead of carrying gold as the male Dead thought, proved full of her father’s remains.

#### **4. Physical movement and historical continuity/ discontinuity**

The movement from the south to the 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. In addition, where their native culture ended, identification with the white man’s culture started. The author warns against the danger of that denial of the past. 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.” (ibid:44). 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. This is a clear instance of change and discontinuity when a very important part of one self is relegated to forgetfulness. The grand father started his way from zero in a new setting, among people whom he knew nothing about at that time.

Time and place are interrelated in the novel. Milkman’s journey is a physical one in space which earns himself 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. 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: 45.)

#### **5. Flight and its Mythical Dimension**

Because 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. 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. There is also another character that is attached to that concept of flying, and with it, Milkman Dead acquires knowledge of both family and community past. 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 under the perspective of 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, a reality for one to have peace. The Rite as initiation is part of the

novel's mythical dimension; it is related to the far past, to the African past where the ancestors made the 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.

## 6. Naming

Naming has always been an issue for the blacks in America at the time of slavery and segregation. They had 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. Naming was thus the "appropriate" way to erase the personality and get rid of the identity of the black people the whites kept under their domination. Namelessness has always been synonymous of "identity-less" or inexistence. In the novel the writer dealt with this issue of naming in a rather mythical, biblical way. She gave her characters names of biblical figures endowed with a wide range of significances that emanates 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 from. In her work, "Morrison compares them to epic heroes whose experience transcends cultural and temporal boundaries." (Ibid.:46.) The problematic of naming and being named has always been part of the African American reality. Names are endowed with both positive and negative connotations. There is a whole symbolic behind it. Would the change of a name erase the trauma of slavery and subjection from one's mind, would the wiping out of the past be a blessing on someone or rather a curse?

## 7. Singing

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 condition as other." (Morrison, 2003:64.)

Singing is a way to express pain and sorrow for the enslaved black community. It also became a poignant way to assert who they were in the middle of all the atrocities that the white man 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, songs rather than history books tell the story of the past. 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 inter-mingling songs which refer to the multitude of character. Of all these songs, we find two particularly distinct ones: "Pilate's song of longing and generosity, together with Macon's song of greed, bequeaths to Milkman a song of knowledge and responsibility." (ibid.:65)

## **8. Culture 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 a new representation of the 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 is a terrible thing to see. It is from that point of separation between the past and the present that Milkman stands. It is from there that he begins, from “that hyper individualization that grows out of the American culture of competition, capitalism and racism.” (Furman, 2003:44) There is a clear transformation in the way certain roles and power structures operate in the Afro -American community and these appear to affect the community in the emergence of the following “cultural” structures: modernity vs. traditionalism and matriarchy vs patriarchy

## **9. Modernity versus Traditionalism**

In the novel there seems to be two different currents: 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 to 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 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: 37) Pilate is an instance of individualism and community life whereas Macon Dead is a clear example of individuality.

## **10. Matriarchy versus Patriarchy**

In the novel Macon Dead “exemplifies the patriarchal, nuclear family that has been traditionally stable.” (Ibid :34) The community degenerated because of materialism and individualism. And to patriarchy succeeded matriarchy embodied by Pilate who “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: 35 ). This seems to be inexistent in her brother’s household. The passage clearly shows that Pilate’s way of life is different from the Bourgeois attitudes that her brother Milkman 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’ -centred fulfilment.

There is a new form of gender bonding in *Song of Solomon*: it is no longer men and men versus women, but it is women and women versus men. This is new considering the exigencies of a community which did not surrender easily to any sense of resistance or aggressiveness on the part of women. 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,2003:65.)

## 11. Conclusion

By the end of the novel the writer shows that Milkman has become aware of the importance of his aunt as the keeper of their family heritage. Pilate's presence in Milkman's life has become so important that he feels that 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,1986:336.)

*Song of Solomon* is also a story of "the development of a historical and ethical awareness in the Bourgeois character of Milkman Dead." (Grewal, 1998:62.) To attain economic stand does not determine who one is. It only fully happens when the character recognize and accept the heritage of the past. Milkman Dead acquires self identity in the end of the novel by his return to the roots of his ancestor culture. He reconstructs the meaning of blackness and regains the integrity of his culture thanks to the large spiritual import that he could get from it. Without willing it, Milkman unconsciously repeats the mythical 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' personal endeavours to uncover a past thought dead, Milkman Dead succeeds in giving his life the meaning which he seemed to have lacked for years. At last, 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 with the 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 that 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 the history and the culture of a community in constant struggle for the fulfilment of its own 'racial' and 'cultural' identity.

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