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## **Excavation of Nativity in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon***

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### **Abstract**

Toni Morrison in her novel *Song of Solomon* depicts Milkman Dead's search for his roots through his journey from the North to the South where his father and his aunt hid a sack of gold. Milkman is a materialistic self-seeking man for whom money and wealth is important and he never understands the feelings of others especially women as well other men of his community. In the process of excavating the nativity Milkman attains spiritual growth from the stagnant life by assimilating western culture and running after the prosperous materialistic life. After coming into contact with his aunt Pilate, who becomes the spiritual mentor of Milkman, he completely changes and becomes conscious of his identity. She guides him in all way and under her tutelage he begins to realize that money does not ensure happiness and he is able to see

women as his equals and tries to understand the reciprocal nature of human relationships.

### **Keywords**

Nativity; Toni Morrison; *Song of Solomon*.

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Toni Morrison is one of the finest contemporary black woman novelists. Morrison describes the tragic consequences of African-American people when they blindly follow and embrace the ideals of white society. In *Song of Solomon* Morrison deals with the theme of initiation and quest for family roots that is nativity which in turn linked to the search for an African-American cultural heritage which enhances the necessity of black social structures for black unity.

Historical changes such as black migration to urban areas, assimilation into the middle class, and acculturation of Western values, have all impacted the traditional values and beliefs that provided the common stock of knowledge for captive African people in the Americas. Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon* addresses these changes and their consequences. The novel witnesses the power of lost and discredited traditions to heal and reconnect the psychically fragmented and spiritually detached individual to the communal whole.

Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* presents a family's history which reflects the collective history of Afro-Americans. The novel is basically the story of Milkman Dead's search for his roots that is his nativity. He undertakes a long and strenuous journey from North to South searching for the gold that his father and aunt hid in grotto in the South. Luckily he overcomes all the impediments and succeeds in establishing and excavating his nativity.

The history of Dead family starts with Macon I, who settles on the farm. His prosperity attracts the attention of greedy whites. They trick him into giving up the title to the farm, but he refuses to leave. For days, he sits on a fence

with his gun, protecting his property and family. Then he is shot from behind. His children witness his death and take to woods until they meet their father's ghost. The ghost leads them to a cave, where an old white man hides with a sack of gold. Out of fear, Macon II kills the white man. After this, he and his sister, Pilate, argue whether they should take the gold. Pilate did not want to touch the gold. To her taking the gold would seem a confirmation of their guilt in the man's death. But to Macon the gold means a promising future where "life, safety, and luxury fanned out before him like the tail spread of a peacock" (171). Pilate prevents him from taking the gold, depriving of this treasure forever. After years of separation, he cannot reconcile himself with her.

Macon Dead II is a materialist and self-seeking egoist who does not care for others' emotions and feelings. He believes that, "Money is freedom"(164). He marries Ruth only because of her money and status. Ruth, the only daughter of the African-American doctor in the town, is born and brought up in an upper middle-class family. She is a society lady representing an ideal Southern lady, who cannot attract the attention of her husband and her life is a loveless one. Macon II hates his wife and terrorizes other members of his family. He is a self-made man orphaned at an early age and deals his way as the richest African-American in town. The avid materialism and rugged individuality make him financially successful. Macon has come to believe that property and success are what count in the world. He does little to help the condition of his fellow African-Americans. He recounts, "Negros in this town worshipped him. He didn't give a damn about them and he called them cannibals" (74). He has aversion for all women but one person he hates more than his wife is his own sister Pilate. Macon says to his son Milkman,

That woman [Pilate] is no good. She is a snake, and can charm you like a snake, but still a snake...Now I mean for you to stay out of that wine house and as far as away from Pilate as you can...and let

me tell you right now the one important thing you will ever need to know: own things. (58-59)

After her separation from her brother, Pilate is uncomfortable to fit into a community and forced to live on her own. She is excluded from three main institutions of community- marriage, friendship and church, and she is deprived of the contact with the people. This isolation made her strong and forced her to live her own life but her place within those boundaries is marginal. She chooses liquor and sells wine. She lives in a narrow single storey house with no electricity and gas. She is generally untidy and smelly, and is town's bootlegger and sings in the streets "like common street women". People come to her house for goods, not for companionship. Her world is both huge and small. Her vision is broad as a result of giving up "all interest table manners or hygiene" and acquiring in its place "a deep concern for and about human relationship" (151).

Macon Dead III alias Milkman is a replica of his class conscious father. He sees a woman as an object. He does not know how to respect a woman. He only pilfers their love and gives nothing in return. As a male chauvinist he abuses the women in his family including his mother, never sees them as human beings. He is used to being waited upon by them. He becomes an egoist, inconsiderate and insensitive man. His sister Magdalena alias Lena, says in anger,

You have been laughing at us all your life...Using us, ordering us, and judging us....When you slept, we were quite; when you were hungry, we cooked; when you wanted to play, we entertained you... and you never asked one of us if we were tired, or sad, or wanted a cup of coffee. (215)

Women were treated as possessions and there was no love. Ryna in the hands of Solomon, Ruth in the hands of Macon II and Hagar in the hands of Milkman were treated as sex objects and met their tragic end when they were

deserted by their beloveds. All the women characters, except Pilate, are dependent and submissive in the novel. They felt that their life has become nothing without their partner and out of sheer madness chose death in the absence of their partner. In the case of Ruth she could have avoided her tragic end by nursing her son Milkman.

Milkman sexually exploits Hagar. She loves him very much: "Totally taken over by her anaconda love, she had no self, no fears, no wants, no intelligence that was her own" (94). But he regarded her as an object and threw her away "like a wad of chewing gum after the flavor was gone" (277). He is incapable of understanding her deep love. Utterly frustrated and desperate, she makes a futile effort to kill him, but unfortunately she herself dies while longing for her lost love. He used her as a sexual object rather than a true companion.

In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman abandoned every woman in his life, but Pilate alone is the woman who commands his respect and love. Owing to her lack of navel, she is an androgynous figure. She personifies African-American culture and history. Unlike her brother she has deep attachment to nature as she smells like a forest. Motherless, she is brought up by the Mother Nature. She is the only woman to realize her individuality in this novel. She becomes the spiritual mentor to Milkman. After coming into contact with her, he completely changes and becomes conscious of his identity. She guides him in fulfilling his ambition.

Toni Morrison depicts in *Song of Solomon* that Milkman's spiritual growth from the stagnant life of assimilating Western culture and running after the prosperous materialistic life without any responsibility for the feelings of other human being to the awareness of his rich black tradition and cultural heritage which rests on humanism. Milkman's growth can be viewed as having three developmental stages of primary, middle and the higher level as Kavitha Arya

sees them, “Pre-liminal, the Liminal and the Post-liminal” (58), which helps him to excavate his nativity.

According to Kavitha Arya, Milkman’s pre-liminal stage concerns with his ignorance or inability to understand the feelings of others, especially women, as well his insensitivity towards other men of his own community. In his Liminal stage of discovery and growth, Milkman starts giving respect to women like Pilate, Ruth and Hagar as well as to the natural world around him, rather than to material world. He becomes aware that his wealth and economic power can do nothing among his native African people, whereas his individual self alone can help him. In the Post-liminal stage of higher level two incidents helped him to attain his individual self. The former is his discovery of the adventurous ability that his great grandfather Solomon could fly and he too learns to fly with the help of his aunt Pilate. And the latter is his expedition in the Shalimar hunt, where he attains courage to shed the fear of death and to accept death. On the whole Milkman overcomes all the impediments and transforms himself with the qualities that respecting men and women of his community, feeling proud of his ancestors and at last accepting death as a natural one to attain his individuality in the process of excavating his nativity.

During the journey from the North to the South, Milkman realizes that with two exceptions, everybody he comes close to seemed to him out of this life. And the two exceptions are both women, both black and old. Both of them come together in the novel to protect Milkman, who for them is the symbol of their continuity. They are his mother Ruth, and his aunt Pilate. Ruth is the epitome of the ideal southern lady and Pilate is a woman, who is totally outside social structures. Morrison compares these two women:

They were so different, these two women. One black the other lemony. One corseted the other buck naked under her dress. One well-read but ill travelled. The other had read only a geography book, but had been from one end of the country to another. One

wholly dependent on money for life, the other indifferent to it. But those were the meaningless things. Their similarities were profound. Both were vitally interested in Macon Dead's son and both had close and supportive posthumous communication with their fathers. (140-141)

Milkman gets plenty of love from Pilate. He learns race and class consciousness from Pilate, who possesses an innate dignity and takes pride in her African-American tradition. Milkman begins to realize that money does not ensure happiness. It is Pilate who shows him the right path. With self-awakening, he comes to value the great assistance he had received from women like Pilate and Hagar. He begins to respect women and the poor blacks.

In the course of his passage, Milkman's consciousness about black brotherhood is awakened by the poor taxi driver, Fred Garnett, who refused to take money for picking Milkman up. Milkman is surprised by the action of driver who idealizes the bond of brotherhood. He learns from the driver the need for brotherhood and the courtesy among black.

Milkman's thirst to drink his ancestors history is saturated by Reverend Cooper, Circe and other old men who remember the two Macon Deads and express great reverence for them. Reverend Cooper, his father's childhood friend tells him, "I know your people." These words thrill Milkman because it affords him an opportunity to know about his family's past. At this juncture, his consciousness rises to a higher level regarding racial oppression. They feast and party in honour of Milkman. This is the first time that Milkman basks in the glorious history of his ancestors and feels a great sense of happiness. When he listens to Shalimar's children's song, he realizes that it is like "that old blues song Pilate sang all the time: 'O Sugarman don't leave me here,' except the children song, 'Solomon don't leave me here'" (300). He feels a sense of pride about the history of his ancestors.

During his journey from North to South, Milkman physically overcomes many impediments that obstruct his trip. He successfully enters into Pilate's house which is characterized by "deeper darkness" to rob the sack of gold. Then he goes through the "greenish black tunnel" to reach Butlers mansion to meet Circe. He overcomes all the minor mishaps to enter into cave which is inhabited by bats. He is physically bruised and exhausted by the troubles he encountered in the woods. He survives the knife and broken bottle fight in Shalimar. His arrogant behavior and his wealth instigate them to challenge him to fight outside the general store. Then he participates in the hunting expedition of bobcat with King Walker's elders. When the hunting expedition ends the hunters give Milkman the lion's share, the heart of the animal, to show that they have accepted him as a member of their community. This means he had succeeded in amalgamating into the community. When he leaves the party he feels his psyche is moulded by his adventurous decision and action he adopts. He experiences a strange loneliness which makes him to realize, "There was nothing to help him- not his money, his car, his father's reputation, his suit or his shoes. In fact they hampered him" (277). The loss of his clothes symbolizes the loss of "the white values he has absorbed and assimilated at the expense of his black values" (Peach 60-61). More importantly the loss of his watch indicates that Milkman losses western concept of time and accepts cyclical concept of time of African people.

In Shalimar, he notices that "the women's hands were empty, no pocketbook, no change purse, no wallet, no keys, no small paper bag, no comb, and no handkerchief. They carried nothing" (259). The picture of women is totally different from that of the women in the industrial North who embrace the materialistic way of life and rely on cosmetics like mascara, lipstick and blusher to seduce and attract others.

The discovery of his great-grandfather Solomon's ability to fly gives him extreme happiness and when he thinks that, "Solomon done fly, Solomon done



gone, Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home” (303). He too craves to fly like Solomon. Pilate only helps him by telling the other ways of flying. He attains at last the ability to fly not in the model of Solomon but in the ways Pilate teaches. He feels proud of their ancestral tradition as well feels ashamed of his great grandfathers’ abandonment of Ryna Gulch, who dies desolately heart broken by the departure of her man Solomon. Automatically, he makes a connection between Ryna and Hagar whom he has left behind to kill herself in forlorn condition. At this juncture he acknowledges his responsibility for Hager’s death and his willingness to receive just punishment. He becomes so happy that he thinks he needs a wide sea to bath him. The image of vast sea can be taken as an indication of his rich ancestral history and his desire to cleanse himself from the impurities which colored his former life by drowning himself in the wide sea of his ancestral history. After bathing himself in the wide sea he becomes a new man with higher level of self- awareness.

In the process of teaching Milkman to fly Pilate is killed by a bullet shot from Guitar’s gun that targets Milkman. Pilate’s death in his arms stifles his fear of death and implants a strong sense of willingness to accept death. In her dying moments Pilate asks Milkman to sing the song of his ancestors. He also learns love from Pilate’s words on the day of her dying. He embraces Pilate’s role and becomes a guiding spirit to others. He asks Guitar to renounce hatred as it destroys and consumes its bearer. He exerts his efforts to wean him away from violence. In this way, Milkman acts as a loadstar that guides people to the right path. His commitment for his people indicates that he is free. He transcends his community’s value system which praises living for others by adopting the idea of sacrificing his life for the sake of others.

Milkman’s self-realization is hampered by his embrace of the materialistic and acquisitive philosophy that he imbibed from his father. When he gives up money- oriented thinking, his conscience rises to a higher level and begins to commingle with American masses. His biased view of women is totally

changed, which prompts him to develop an equalitarian and humanistic view of man and women. All these together pave way to the recovery of his true self. Interestingly, as an individual he overcomes all the impediments which obstruct his way and succeeds in constructing his own identity. His journey is crowned with the sprouting of his spiritual identity, connecting him to the past incorporating him to the present, and peaking him to the pinnacle of self – discovery. Ultimately he emerges as a triumphant hero, who traces his rich history and culture and succeeds in identifying with the community spiritually and physically. He bathes his soul in the glorious history and agrarian culture of his ancestors. He learns to fly without even leaving the ground. He establishes identity and finds meaning in life. So his journey is successful at all levels and he emerges as a totally changed man, a new Milkman in the process of excavating his nativity.

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