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Unshackling the Self: A Journey through Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*

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Abstract

Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* is a profound exploration of identity, freedom, and the human quest for self-discovery. Through Milkman's journey, Morrison intricately weaves themes of cultural heritage, ancestral legacy, and personal liberation. This article delves into how Milkman's transformative journey from alienation to self-awareness reflects broader struggles of identity formation, particularly within the context of African American experiences. By analyzing Morrison's narrative techniques, symbolism, and character dynamics, this study highlights the novel's nuanced portrayal of 'self' as both an individual and collective pursuit. Ultimately, *Song of Solomon* emerges as a powerful testament to unshackling the self from societal and psychological constraints, urging readers to embrace the complexities of identity and belonging.

Key Words: Song of Solomon, self-identity, belonging

Toni Morrison's works are among the most important novels that debate racism, sexism and the complex links between them. Because of their powerful political position and ability to depict the social realities, they deserve close examination. Some of her works may seem to lack discussion on the current issues of African American life and experience because of the specific historical backdrops such as slavery era, emancipation, Civil Rights Movements and generally the events of the past decades; but the authenticity of the representation of black people's life, the origin and function of racism proves them valuable and demands more analysis. As Keith Byerman writes in *Remembering the Past in African American Fiction*, Toni Morrison cannot be understood as a writer who stands outside her historical moment and produces 'transcendent' works of literature.



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Song of Solomon is Morrison's third novel, published in 1977. And it became commercially a tremendous success and it was tentatively titled "Milkman Dead" and later it was selected as the Book of the month club and this was the black author's book selected by the club since 1940 when Richard Wright's "Native Son" (1940) was published. The sales of this novel have created history. The very first month it was published by Knopf *Song of Solomon* was sold to new American library for an estimated \$115,000 and in more than ten countries, translation rights have been sold.

The National Book Critics circle, the American Academy and institute of letters duly bestowed awards on this novel. It also won the National Book award for the best novel and it was favourably reviewed in the New York Times book review on the front page. The publication of this novel catapulted her fame to new heights and established her as one of the celebrated novelists of America. Speaking about *Song of Solomon*, Morrison observes that this novel reflects an expansion of her artistic vision and range and she says:

"The challenge of "Song of Solomon" was to manage what was for me a radical shift in imagination from female locus to male one. To get out of the house to de-domesticate the landscape that had so far been the sight of my work. To travel, To fly" (Morrison II).

Morrison makes it clear that she would adopt a plain linear method of narrative ...that is in a chronological order. Unlike the techniques adopted in the previous novels where events in the story are narrated not in a chronological way. It is well known that Morrison is primarily concerned with "womanist" writings. She takes it as a challenge to present growing up black female in a white male dominated society. The word "womanist" was coined by Alice Walker, a noted African American novelist well known for her novels like "Meridian" and "The Third

Life of Granger Operand" and with a slight difference the term 'womanist' is equivalent of feminist. The former focuses on both sexism and racism and demands respect for the achievements and contributions of black women and they must be treated on par with black men.

Morrison focuses on women characters in her first two novels, namely, *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, now she focuses on male character in her third novel, *Song of Solomon* and asked why she chose a male protagonist for this novel; she answers "because I thought he had more to learn than a woman would have." The novel draws on a number of sources like myths and legends. It chiefly centres on two important stories the Yoruba Folktale of the flying Africans and *Song of Solomon*, the twenty second book of the Old Testament. There is a harmonious blend of fantasy and reality in this novel; and Morrison says that this novel



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is about a man who learns to fly and all that it means. But it is something more than this, if the reader grasps what is in between the lines; he will understand that it is about the ways which enable one to discover one's identity and in the process one gains one's self-knowledge as to who we are and what we are.

One special trait about Morrison is that in a casual manner, she spills drops of wisdom on the intricacies of human life. She is, indeed, an intuitive genius. This novel is chiefly addressed to black people and she tries to create a new consciousness for them through her writings and tries to make them wean from their false consciousness. Morrison's novels and other writings are written with commitment and a gravity of purpose. Her deepest conviction is that blacks are in no way inferior to whites; given proper opportunities, blacks can prove their native mettle in any sphere of activity. She exhorts them to rise to the occasion and feel racial pride; of course, it is not a very easy task. The African American blacks, in Morrison's opinion, are in no way inferior to the whites; the black people are made weak by their superimposition of their (white man's) view point. They are now weak because they don't know that they are strong.

Morrison does perform a laudable job in inculcating the innate spirit of their racial consciousness through her dynamic writings. Morrison is a dauntless champion of the black culture and their racial heritage. Song of Solomon, more than any of Morrison's novels, expresses her sense of deep commitment to black life and culture and examines the role of African Americans in relation to white mainstream society and the legacy of slavery on the history and experience of blacks in America. Morrison may justly be termed as the prophetess of black culture and the black racial heritage and she puts her heart and soul into every writing of hers to vindicate stoutly the cause of the African American community. Morrison's deep sense of commitment is well expressed when she avowedly affirms:

"I simply wanted to write literature that was irrevocably, indisputably black" and continues, "not because its characters were or because I was, but because it took its creative task and sought as its credentials those recognized and verifiable principles of black art" (Dahill-Baue 9).

Morrison, in all her novels, explores themes of various nature and importance; her major theme remains to be the search for love and identity. This is her major theme. According to Asante:

"Afrocentricity pervades every aspect of African American culture (as well as much of dominant Euro-American society). Moreover, he states that "Black Americans retained basic components the African experience rather than specific artefacts so, when Morrison recreates African cultural



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traditions in Song of Solomon, she is formulating her discourse within an Afro centric world view” (Middleton 111).

Morrison reiterates time and again that she is committed to exposing of her racial, cultural heritage as a writer first and last. It was during the winter of 1967 under the dynamic leadership of Martin Luther king Jr, the human rights leader, the black power movement was at its height and it was at the time that Morrison came out with the slogan ‘Black is Beautiful’; the black arts movement at the same time came out with the objective that the black artistic expression was to achieve social change and moral and political revolution and Morrison also believed that art is political; a contemporary African American renowned writer, who began to associate himself with the avant-garde artists best summarized when he says that art should be “fists and daggers and pistols to clean out the world for virtue and love.”

Morrison identifies herself thoroughly with black experience and her racial culture. She evinces keen interest in everything related to black art. Morrison discusses these things through the conversation between Guitar and Milkman in the course of the novel. Morrison’s Master’s thesis on Faulkner shows that she has been to some extent, influenced by his writings. And they-(her books) are deeply imbued with her own black folk roots and community to which she belongs. Morrison, referring to some of the factors that powerfully influenced her as a young girl, observes that the stories from the folklore of their community, as narrated by her parents, have left a deep impact on her impressionable mind. Her community’s folklore narrates stories about magic, the ghosts of the dead returning to life and certain weird experiences which are exclusively peculiar to their culture.

Morrison, for instance, feels hesitant when she introduces the ghost or the spirit of the murdered ‘Beloved’ coming back to life; for she thinks that some people are sceptical about the existence of ghosts. But she is thoroughly convinced of the existence of ghosts as part of her racial culture. Thus the reader, while going through her novel, feels that he enters an alien culture that abound in superstitions and strange beliefs. Morrison, true to her deep-rooted convictions, shares some of the experiences in common with the people of her own community As such, Morrison has been genuinely espoused to the cause of her cultural heritage. She calls her novels the “village literature” and they are really meant for the tribe.

The title is symbolic and if it is understood in its literal sense, it doesn’t have any direct bearing on the story of the novel. It would be very difficult for the reader to perceive how the present title is appropriate to the novel. Even critics differ in their interpretation of the title of the “Song of Solomon”. The phrase ‘Song of Solomon’ is well known and every Christian is familiar with it as the twenty-second Book of The Old Testament comprising a



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collection of love songs presented in the form of a dialogue between two lovers. The lovers are identified as Solomon, the third king of Israel, known for his wisdom and riches and Shulamite woman, the legendary Queen of Sheba, also known as the queen of the South, the Black Minerva, and Makeda, the Beautiful. The songs are full of passionate love of erotic nature and they have been explained or interpreted in as many ways as there are interpreters but to an average reader, the present title Song of Solomon doesn't appear to be appropriate to the novel but Toni Morrison, with her poetic sensibility, gives the present title to the novel with symbolic significance. Pilate, the dominant character in the novel, is a symbol of ancient wisdom and she worked for peace and happiness of those that she knew and her heart overflows with the milk of human kindness and love.

Thus the Wisdom of Solomon and the love expressed through the songs of Solomon illustrated in the Old Testament are abundantly found in Pilate's philosophy of life. Thus the present title, namely, Song of Solomon is quite appropriate as the title to the novel. Readers who are well familiar with I Kings and I Chronicle which deal with the history of King Solomon and his relationship with the queen of Sheba will find a good number of connections between the novel and the biblical texts. For instance, Pilate is described as 'sheltering cedar tree', the same kind of tree used to build Solomon's temples. And both of them challenge the wisdom of the men.

Solomon and Macon, respectively who have established themselves as rulers of their respective kingdoms. Solomon and Macon Dead suffer from a loss of spiritual faith. Both Solomon and Macon give great importance to material wealth as well as for their sexual philandering. King Solomon and Macon are known for their exploits and accomplishments but in the lives of the two persons it was the two women, namely, Sheba and Pilate who wield the true power.

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