



## ***TONI MORRISON'S SONG OF SOLOMON: THE PROTAGONIST'S STRUGGLE TO DISCOVER SELF-IDENTITY***

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### **ABSTRACT**

Like Morrison's first two novels, *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*, *Song of Solomon* (1977) is a coming of age story. Unlike her first two novels, *Song of Solomon* centrally is the saga of a young man. In fact, *Song of Solomon* is the first of Morrison's novels to have a male as a primary protagonist. *Song of Solomon* draws on diverse mythological traditions, particularly biblical, Greco-Roman, and African to create a uniquely African-American narrative. The story requires the reader to participate in order to piece together the seemingly incompatible elements of the story to make a sensible and meaningful whole. Milkman, the primary character in *Song of Solomon*, is a self-absorbed, petulant, and rootless man who begins a self-interested quest for financial gain and ends up covering the story of his family. Through the process of learning about his history, Milkman matures, learns responsibility, transcends his own selfishness, and creates a meaningful existence for himself embedded in an embrace of his family history. *Song of Solomon* won the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1977. Morrison credits the success of *Song of Solomon* with her self-identification as a writer.

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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 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 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 is not out of place to quote Timothy B Powel in this context:

“No one to my mind has accomplished this more fully than Toni Morrison. Her triumph has not come without a struggle and it is this ongoing quest over the course of her first three novels which I will attempt to delineate her. From the pain and dissimulation chronicled in “*The Bluest Eye*” (1970), to the grief and sadness of “*Sula*” (1973), Toni Morrison embarks on a journey which ends with a soaring affirmation of black selfhood in the last lines of “*Song of Solomon*” (1977) (Middleton 47).

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 abounds 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.

Critics believe that certain celebrated contemporary novelists like James Joyce, William Faulkner—the Nobel laureate ... Virginia Woolf and Marquez have profoundly influenced Morrison in the matter of her technique and, to some extent, the imagery that she uses in her novels. Morrison's narrative technique is rather complex since she adopts a technique known as stream of consciousness and flashback narration where incidents or events are not narrated in a chronological order. But Morrison inveighs against the charge that she has been influenced by the aforesaid novelists and strongly disagrees with them.

A critical reader, in spite of her disagreement, can trace certain echoes of these

celebrated predecessors. For instance, David Cowart in his learned essay, *Faulkner and Joyce in Morrison's Song of Solomon*, cites a good many instances to show the influences on her of some of these well-known writers already mentioned: for instance, he observes "Morrison imagines freedom, for instance, in images of flight, images "grounded," she asserts in the mirth of the Flying African. But the same images invite comparison with those of Joyce in *A Portrait of The Artist of A Young Man*. He cites another example that like Faulkner that identity has its roots in the past, and there also stylistically images she owes to Faulkner in passages of speculation about a lost or absolute personal history.

When critics insistently say that Morrison has been influenced by some distinguished writers like, James Joyce and William Faulkner, and Virginia Woolf, she sharply disagrees with them; she affirms that she has not been in the least influenced by any one of these writers. She asserts:

"I am not like James Joyce; I am not like Thomas Hardy; I am not like Faulkner. I am not like that in that sense. I do not have objections to being compared to such extraordinary gifted and facile writers, but it does not leave me sort of hanging there when I know that my effort is to be like something that has probably only been fully expressed in music[...] (Middleton 96).

In another interview, Morrison remarks that from age seventeen, when she left for school:

"The things I studied were Western and, you know, I was terrifically fascinated with all of that, and at that time any information that came to me from my own people seemed to be backwoods and unformed" (Middleton 96).

In other words, until she took her M.A. degree, her main interest was Afro- American literature. David Cowart cites one more example to prove that there has been an unmistakable influence of Faulkner on Morrison. To quote the author David Cowart:

"Morrison's encounter with her precursors takes

place in the story of a young man named Macon Dead III “Milkman” Dead who undertakes a quest into his personal history and encounters his own precursors: Jake and Sing, Solomon and Ryana. Milkman’s quest reveals parallels, first, with similar quests in the works of Faulkner” (Middleton 97).

This observation made by David Cowart can be well substantiated by a similar statement in different contexts by Anthony Thwait. He notes in a review of *Sula* the presence of “Faulknerisms” in *Song of Solomon*. Other critics have also briefly noted the Faulknerian overtones of the hunt that Milkman goes on late in the novel. David Cowart, a distinguished critic in his learned and enlightening essay traces the echoes of the two famous writers, James Joyce and Faulkner in Morrison. But in the same breath, he affirms that Morrison is a very original genius and she is never prone to imitate any writer and she would be never an epigone; moreover, Morrison’s pervasive theme in all her novels is black experience. It will not be out of place to quote Gay Wilentz in this context:

“Although she (Morrison) wrote her master’s thesis on Faulkner and has acknowledged influence by Marquez and Latin American writers, Morrison’s writings are deeply entrenched in her own black folk roots and the community in which she grew up. Moreover, her text is informed by her mother’s stories, her tribe, and her ancestors ...African and African American” (Middleton 109).

Toni Morrison is a titanic figure among American fiction-writers. Her first novel *The Bluest Eye* was published in 1970 at the age of 39. Though commercial-wise it was not a success, it bore the germs of her future greatness and her second novel *Sula* attracted the attention of the critics and was warmly acclaimed and in both

the novels the protagonists are females; but in her third novel entitled *Song of Solomon* a male one figures as the protagonist. And it was published in 1977 and it became, indeed, a tremendous success and brought her both money and fame in no little measure. It was immediately acclaimed by critics as one of beauty and power. It is mythical and magical in theme and is chiefly based on folktale. Racially and culturally, Morrison is nothing if not African. This famous novel explores the quest for cultural identity and it is based on African

American folktale which describes the daring adventures that the enslaved African Americans performed in the past in trying to escape slavery by flying back to Africa. It is a family saga---a story of adventures of three generations and Macon Dead III, popularly known by the name Milkman Dead, is its protagonist. Since the protagonist is a female in the previous two novels. Morrison has decided to write a “novel informed by a male spirit”.

At the time when Morrison was writing the novel, her personal life was filled with gloom; financially she was in straightened circumstances and her beloved father passed away at that time and she had to attend the funeral at Ohio and had to admit her elder son in a music school in Michigan. It has been already noted that this novel contains umpteen characters that belong to three generations that are closely knit into a web of labyrinthine relationships. And Morrison very deftly presents a portrait of gallery-infinite variety of characters. The action of the novel is thick as the characters are crowded and as such, the story assumes mini-epic dimensions with many layers. Once the reader follows these relationships clearly, it will be easier for the reader to locate each one in the right perspective.

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