

Love and Legacy: Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*



English Literature

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ABSTRACT

Love and hatred are perennial themes for every writer worth his ink and they equally fascinated the readers down the ages. What is love? and why one loves? are the questions that battered the brilliant minds for a long time. For Shakespeare 'love is not time's fool', for John Keats love is the ultimate truth as he said, 'Beauty is truth, truth is beauty' and for M. K. Gandhi love is God. Love, Truth and God serve as synonyms and whoever wanted to pen something, cannot escape them. Love or its absence constitutes the whole of our world literature. Toni Morrison is no exception. Her master work Song of Solomon is perhaps the greatest novel ever written by Afro-American which has a close affinity to Alex Haley's Roots. The protagonist, Milkman, in a transcendental stage finds himself metamorphosed – discovers his identity, ancestral legacy and capacity for love and joy and learns to fly without ever leaving the ground.

I Introduction

Love and hatred are perennial themes for every writer worth his ink and they equally fascinated the readers down the ages. What is love? and why one loves? are the questions that battered the brilliant minds for a long time. For Shakespeare 'love is not time's fool', for John Keats love is the ultimate truth as he said, 'Beauty is truth, truth is beauty' and for M. K. Gandhi love is God. Love, Truth and God serve as synonyms and whoever wanted to pen something, cannot escape them. Love or its absence constitutes the whole of our world literature. Toni Morrison is no exception. According to Terry Otten(1993), Morrison's depiction of love is so multifaceted that she is able to "transform conventional 'signifiers' of cruelty and evil into gestures of love." Although Morrison's novels are distinctively different from each other, she comments on the similarity of theme in her interview with Jane S. Bakerman(1978): "Beauty, love ... Actually, I think, all the time that I write, I am writing about love or its absence ... how people relate to one another and miss it or hang on to it ... and how to survive whole."

Toni Morrison's master work *Song of Solomon* is perhaps the greatest novel ever written by Afro-American which has a close affinity to Alex Haley's *Roots*. Milkman's search for his roots which includes moral risk is nothing short of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* in which the tranquility of knowing themselves compensates the struggle the pilgrims undergo in their yogic quest to know God. Milkman's exposure to moral risk is as impressive and as great as Becket's almost voluntary slaughter in the hands of knights in the Canterbury Church as projected by T.S.Eliot in his *Murder in Cathedral*. Milkman in a transcendental stage finds himself metamorphosed – discovers his identity, ancestral legacy and capacity for love and joy and learns to fly without ever leaving the ground.

II Journey of Milkman Dead

Song of Solomon is a complex novel with an objective ending which has been seen as a Biblical allegory and a young man's search for his roots. Milkman is the son of Macon Dead and Ruth Foster. Macon Dead is the very embodiment of tyranny and achieves material progress in the imitation of whites at the cost of poor blacks. He advises his son to follow his own example. On the other hand his sister Pilate, to whom progress was a word that meant walking a little further on down the road, represents folk and family consciousness which she demonstrates by listening to her father's ghost and befriending Macon's wife and son. Milkman's progress in his quest for identity is a progress from his father's values to Pilate's – he sets out looking for gold but ends up looking at his own heritage.

III Love in Multicolours

In *Song of Solomon*, one comes across love in its splendor as well as in its weariness. Pilate represents platonic love in its true

sense as she never demands any commitment from the man who impregnates her. As a mother she sustains and nurtures her daughter and granddaughter without expecting anything in return. As a sister she never expects Macon Dead, her brother to do anything for her and further extends her compassion to him despite his thorough hatred for her. With a platonic motherly love she protects Milkman Dead before his birth, extends her full warmth to him when he is a child, guides him in his quest for self-identity and she even fell to the bullet that is intended for him. Such blood that spilled on Milkman bestowed him with courage, manliness and above all a feeling and respect for fellow human beings.

The bankruptcy of love drives a man to that of an animal plane where it degrades human beings to eat, drink and to hoard but never to strive for higher life. Macon Dead, who misunderstands his father's command, goes to any extent to acquire something. He marries Ruth for her property sake and kills her spiritually and her father physically. He has no meaning for human life as he is more interested in acquiring property. He advises his son saying that "Own things and let the things you own, own other things. Then you will own yourself and other people too." [3] Unable to overcome his obsession with material treasures, Macon Dead fails to love his family. Further he hates and disapproves it, especially his wife Ruth.

Missing the mother's love from her childhood, Ruth depends on her father too much for love and affection. The moment she marries Macon, her father feels relieved from the clutches of her love. Ruth, unable to bear a loveless husband, seeks help from Pilate and gives birth to Milkman. Her superfluous love makes her breast feed Milkman even at the age of four, until it becomes the name of the boy and a town's gossip. Rejected by father, husband and son, Ruth remains unauthentic, empty and isolated without any independent self. Nevertheless, in his quest for authentic existence Milkman concludes that a mother, without a personal identity has very little to offer.

Milkman, with the discovery of the home of his aunt Pilate, moves away from his house that traps on one side converting him into drudgery of material acquisition and on the other side driving him to insanity with bankrupt emotional love. However, Milkman's first visit to Pilate's home along with his friend Guitar, initiates his journey towards his legacy. Somehow Guitar accompanies Milkman either directly or indirectly throughout his journey. In the beginning Guitar's racial consciousness is associated with Pilate and her human values but later it is contrasted favourably with Milkman's selfishness. Guitar joins the Seven Days, a vigilante group, whose philosophy is to kill whites in retaliation for the murder of blacks, just as blacks have historically paid for alleged crimes against whites. 'Love' for Seven Days is like the love of one soldier for a countryman who has died in

combat. When Milkman argues that there is no love in such life, Guitar says. "No love? No love? Didn't you hear me? What I'm doing ain't about hating white people. It's about loving us. About loving you. My whole life is love."(p.159)

Ultimately, the challenge Guitar extends to Milkman is that he and his comrades are no longer willing to wait for justice for black people. It becomes clear to Milkman that Guitar, as a representative of the Seven Days, is no longer the same childhood friend to him. Their differences are political and class oriented and makes them frightened and antagonistic to each other. It is clear when Milkman rub the ankle of his short leg and says, "I am scared for you, man." Guitar responds, "That's funny. I'm scared for you too."(p.161)

Their friendship strains as one struggle for individual salvation and the other to fund the revolution to liberate black society from mental slavery. By the end of the novel, the gulf between them widens and Guitar's ability to kill whites has developed into the determination to terminate his 'brother' Milkman. Unlike Guitar, Milkman is insensitive, lecherous and fails to understand the love of Hagar. He is more physically attracted towards Hagar, the granddaughter of Pilate. For Hagar Milkman became her world. "Totally taken over by her anaconda love, she had no self left, no fears, no wants, no intelligence that was her own."(p.137)She has made Milkman's life more important than her own. But Milkman becomes bored with her accessibility and says "she was the third beer . . . But the third, the one you drink because it's there, because it can't hurt and because what difference does it make."(p.91) He bids farewell to their love by sending a letter to her on Christmas day. Hagar becomes a victim of the strain between her possessive love and Milkman's infidelity. She wants to own Milkman even if she has to kill him. When he rejects her she decides to transform herself into the kind of woman Milkman will love and value forever. In this process Pilate and Reba go to that extent of selling the diamond, the only valuable thing they possess. Even this attempt, impassioned, chaotic and pitiful as it is, fails and in the process Hagar becomes fatally ill and dies. Her death might be a ritualistic sacrifice on her part in order to bring success to Milkman in his quest. Like a platonic subject he extends full commitment to his quest without any attachment to family relations. Those who are well acquainted with Plato's philosophy take no objection to his flirting with Sweet and other women as they are only to comfort him, sharpen his aim without any other temptations. Once he understands the noncommittal and unconditional love, he prefers to die in the place of Pilate.

IV Pilate, The Pilot

Pilate, with her reverence for the legacy, her secrecy and defiance, she becomes Milkman's pilot, the guiding force, the pedagogue who introduces him to the mysteries of life and death and of blackness. "You think dark is just one colour, but it ain't. There are five or six kinds of black."(p.40)With her pebbly voice, she spells for him the secrets of the world. Her many gifts as natural healer, skilled wine maker, singer, conjure woman, soothsayer and truth giver bear testimony to the extent of legacy of black womankind. She initiates Milkman into the wisdom and beliefs and souls of his people and challenges his indifference and ignorance.

In addition to knowing herself and loving others, Pilate gives expression to her life principles. What Pilate fails to comprehend Milkman succeeds and they both share the fruit of discovery in the end. Pilate mistakes her father's message 'to sing' to be a directive to her to sing and gets consoled in her isolation. Milkman, who seeks information about his past and ancestors from his aunt and father, discovers on his southern odyssey the secrets of his flying African family history. Macon sends Milkman to Danville, Pennsylvania, where he believes that the gold must

still be buried. Failing to find it there, Milkman goes to Shalimar, Virginia, in an effort to retrace Pilate's journey and discover the hidden gold. When Milkman arrives in Danville, he is treated benignly by Reverend Cooper and Circe who stand as symbol of love for community as they recite Milkman's family history like groits and help him unravel his muddled past. It is Circe who guides him in the direction of Hunter's cave, where, she tells him, he will find his grandfather's remains, for he has not been properly buried.

Milkman experiences rebirth in Shalimar when Luther and Calvin take him on a hunt. In the woods he overcomes fear by defeating Guitar's challenge to take his life and he indicates his preparedness for manhood by firing the rifle at the hunted bobcat. The way Milkman is attacked by the Seven Days in the woods reflects the plight of the pilgrims who are attacked by seven devils in the hills as described by Bunyan in his *Pilgrim's Progress*. It is symbolic portrayal of the religious struggle which the pilgrims must overcome to reach the celestial city. But in the case of Milkman it is symbolic portrayal of self-struggle which he must overcome to reach the point of salvation. Milkman leaves his indecisiveness in the woods and metaphorically takes flight into self.

V Flying African Legacy

Milkman gets the most important clue to his background from the song of Solomon, the folk song he over hears children singing as they play a game in a little Virginia town. Finally he discovers that he came from a family of flying Africans who sought freedom from slavery. Milkman finally discovers his inheritance and identity at the end of his journey as he understands that the bones in Pilate's 'treasure' are Jake's remains. Milkman and Pilate return to Shalimar and gave the remains an appropriate burial shortly before Pilate fell to the bullets of Guitar, who secretly accompanies Milkman for the gold. When Pilate transmits the 'O Sugarman' song to Milkman at the end of her life, she has enlarged and extended this song with which she has ushered him into his life to such a degree that he can sing 'O Sugargirl' and understand that she has flown without ever leaving the ground. As if to reinforce her ability to fly, a bird swoops down at her death, picks up the snuff box containing her name and wins it across the skies.

According to the Bible nobody can become a martyr by design. A chosen few by God are destined. The essential feature of a martyr is lack of temptation even for martyrdom. Pilate, a woman born free as she is described as a girl with no navel, in her unconditional love, disinterested pursuit and all-encompassing warmth for life and all living may be taken as a fit subject for martyrdom and worth canonize. In her death by spilling the blood on Milkman Dead she induces him with tranquil sense of nirvana and virtually baptizes him against the evils of meaningless mundane life. Eventually Milkman offers himself to Guitar saying that "You need it? Here."(p.337)The novel ends ambiguously with Milkman leaping from a cliff to fight with Guitar. "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 surrendered to the air, you could ride it."(p.337)

VI Conclusion

Any journey that is undertaken with utmost devotion and love, even though haunted by uncertainty, never ends unfruitful as in the case of the three wise men, Magi, who go in search of babe Christ; the journey of Lord Buddha in search of truth; the journey of pilgrims to the Celestial city in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*; the journey of Alex Haley to his roots; and Milkman's search for identity. As Dorothy H. Lee(1982) points out, "Only when self-knowledge and self-love are in place one can experience true transcendence, one can ride the air, 'fly' like Pilate and Milkman, one can sing her / his 'song of songs' - her / his song

of Solomon.” Morrison suggests through her characters that to achieve some equilibrium, love is paramount and that love of oneself and one’s people help identify one’s self and true legacy. Nancy Carol Joyner(1980) praises Morrison saying that “despite her creation of idiosyncratic characters and bizarre circumstances in her novels, the message she provides in her compelling theme has universal appeal.”

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