

Concept of Womanism in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*

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Abstract

Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) is one of the prominent novels in the African-American literature. It revolves around signifying the importance of the black culture in the life of the black people and particularly of black women. The paper, through the myth of the flying African who escaped slavery and left his wife behind, sheds light on the significant role of black women in their community and focuses on the term womanism as it is derived from this role.

المستخلص

تعتبر رواية توني موريسون (أغنية سليمان) عام 1977 أحد أبرز الروايات في الأدب الإفريقي الأميركي. تدور الرواية حول إبراز أهمية ثقافة السود في حياتهم وخصوصاً في حياة النساء السود. فمن خلال أحداث أسطورة الإفريقي الطائر الذي استطاع الهروب من العبودية تاركاً زوجته وراءه، يسلط البحث الضوء على الدور المهم للمرأة السوداء في مجتمعها ويركز على مصطلح المرأوية الذي اشتق من هذا الدور.

Since Toni Morrison populates her novel *Song of Solomon* (1977) with female characters, she is primarily recognized for her “womanist” writings. She only wrote within the cultural mainstream of her era which witnessed the Black art movement and the emergence of the black identity in America. She portrays the challenges of growing up black and female in a white, male-dominated culture.

Alice Walker in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983) is the first who coined the term womanism. She argues that this concept is, in some respects, the African-American equivalent of “feminist.”¹⁰ Originally, Alice Walker, among other different contemporary issues, addresses the hardships that black women have had to endure in the past and their persistent ability to maintain their creativity, self-worth and self-respect throughout the years of oppression. Walker uses a variety of different methods to convey this message and explain in detail exactly how black creativity has survived throughout the most painful and enduring times. Most importantly Walker manifests through certain examples that in early literature by black men, black women were portrayed as hopeless and passive figures. Unlike black men, they did not have the opportunity or may be the privilege to have their own

dreams and achievements but rather they were expected for household duties only like raising their husbands' children or as sexual objects. Alice Walker argues:

They [black women] stumbled blindly through their lives: creatures so abused and mutilated in body, so dimmed and confused by pain, that they considered themselves unworthy even of hope. In the selfless abstractions their bodies became to the men who used them, they became more than "sexual objects,"... 2

Looked at from a feminist point of view, these black women would appear as "marginalized and oppressed" by the men but the full image of womanism is a more pressing issue than that of sexism or gender roles that feminism focuses on. In addition to the fact that the black women uphold the principles that required the men to consider them as equally valuable and deserving of just treatment, they stress that their worth stems from the community they live in. However, at some points, Patricia Hill Collins discusses that the black women's point of view was regarded as black feminism just because African American women recently became aware of their voice and historical stand.³ In this respect, Janiece L. Blackmon argues that the African woman "did not see herself as an individual but rather a vital part of the entire Black community." 4

Carmen Mojica furthermore comparatively argues that feminism is female-centered and revolves around the empowerment of the female in a patriarchal society. It sees the male counterpart as the primary enemy. It also focuses on equality across the board for men and women. While in terms of womanism theory from a black woman's perspective, womanism is family-centered and women do not necessarily feel the same way. Although oppressed and enslaved by the white, African women have always been equal to their male counterparts due to the fact both have been equal partners in the struggle against oppression. 5

Explaining storytelling in the tradition of the black community Morrison remarkably refers to this concept:

There was a comradeship between men and women in the marriages of my grandparents, and of my mother and my father. The business of story-telling was a shared activity between them, and people of both genders participated in it. We, the children, were encouraged to participate in it at a very early age. This was true with my grandfather and grandmother, as well as with my father and mother, and with my uncles and aunts. There were no conflicts of gender in that area, at the level at which such are in vogue these days. My mother and my father did not fight about who was supposed to do what. Each confronted whatever crisis there was. 6

Morrison frequently stresses that the contemporary black women, particularly, black women writers consistently look back to their mothers and grandmothers for the

substance and authority in their voices. She often underlies the inspirational role and talents of her mother and ancestors. Her great-grandmother, for instance, was illiterate but she was a prominent midwife and gave help to everyone. She states that "The women in my family were very articulate. Of course my great-grandmother could not read, but she was a midwife, and people from all over the state came to her for advice and for her to deliver babies. They came for other kinds of medical care too. Yes, I feel the authority of those women more than I do my own." ⁷Yet under the burden of slavery the black men did not preserve their role in the family as will be argued later in the paper.

Based on this and other factors womanism acquires its importance from the history of the black. Patricia further excerpts that womanism could result from the belief that historically blacks and whites cannot function as equals while inhabiting the same territory or participating in the same social institutions. This points out that white people have "a vested interest in continuing a system of white supremacy, it typically sees little use for black integration or assimilation into a system predicated on black subjugation".⁸

Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* also explores and draws on the African mythological traditions, particularly biblical, and folklore and digs into history and imagination to stir the impact of slavery on the identity and standpoint of African American women and its consequence. Thus she expounds that the black women's heritage and past are integral parts that lead to awareness of their integrity. ⁹Kalenda C. Eaton also reads womanism as an agenda that identifies the root of the struggle as lying within the poor and working class and black females as continuously connected to the needs and desires of the community. ¹⁰Thus, they did not recognize their worth until later when a generation of African-American women heralded a wake-up in the black literature. Toni Morrison is one of such black voices.

One of the recurring points in *Song of Solomon* suggests that African Americans must be aware of their existences by reconnecting with their past. Although the narrative focuses on the quest of the main protagonist, Milkman, and subsequent spiritual transformation, Morrison clearly emphasizes other female characters whose real dimensions may be unrecognized in the narrative if we look at them superficially. The major female characters, Ruth Foster Dead, Magdalene (Lena) Dead, First Corinthians Dead, Reba (Rebecca), Pilate, and Hagar, are mentioned in the encompassing myth of the African flight in the novel. However, one of the prominent female figures in the novel may be Solomon's wife in the myth of Solomon the flying

African who escaped slavery. This myth is referred to in the epigraph. Consequently, flight and escape became obvious mythical motifs.

The epigraph also implies that in the black community the fathers are forced, under slavery, to abandon their patriarchal role in the family leaving their wives without support. So the myth alludes to a paradox and a threat. Here rises a point which may be implied in the novel. If the fathers and husbands escape, what about the women left behind? When Solomon managed to escape back to Africa, he left his wife Ryna Gulch and twenty one children. Ryna is mentioned repeatedly in the last part of the novel when Circe, an old midwife, narrates Solomon's myth to Milkman. Circe narrates:

Her name was Ryna. They say she screamed and screamed, lost her mind completely. You don't hear about women like that anymore, but there used to be more—the kind of woman who couldn't live without a particular man. And when the man left, they lost their minds, or died or something. Love, I guess. But I always thought it was trying to take care of children by themselves, you know what I mean?" (Morrison, 522)

So the point behind *Song of Solomon* could be the situation and significance of black women in the black community. Hence Ryna can be argued to have a vital role that triggers the significance of the rest of the female figures in *Song of Solomon*. The scenes that describe women's abandonment show that in the novel, men bear responsibility only for themselves, but women are responsible for themselves, their families, and their communities. When Solomon flew home to Africa without warning anyone of his departure, his wife who was also a slave was forced to remain in Virginia to raise her twenty-one children alone. Also, after Guitar's father is killed in a factory accident, Guitar's grandmother has to raise him and his siblings. Although she is elderly and ill, she supports her children financially, intellectually, and emotionally. Accordingly, the society in the novel judges men and women differently. While men who fly away from their communities and families are venerated as heroes, women who do the same are judged to be irresponsible.

Although Solomon abandoned his family with his flight to Africa, generations later he is remembered as the brave patriarch of the whole community. At the same time, Ryna, who was left to care for a brood of children, is remembered as a woman who went mad because she was too weak to bear the responsibility. The community rewards Solomon's abandonment of his children but punishes Ryna's inability to take care of them alone.

Ryna may be deliberately presented as passive in this myth just because the narrative focuses on the male dominant role, yet her suffering could be read differently if she is looked at as staying true to her children and those around her. Morrison shows how

she also keeps influencing those who read her story including Milkman who becomes aware of the damage inflicted by his great-grandfather. As shown later in the novel, Ryna leads Milkman to question and reflect upon his own relation with Hagar. In this respect, Ashley Pond discusses that:

Morrison uses Milkman as a vehicle to uncover Ryna and Hagar's stories, laying bare the inadequacies of such typical narratives of the past as Solomon's and even Milkman's, presumably, before the reader becomes aware of Morrison's subtle strategy. While three generations of women lie between Ryna and her great, great-granddaughter, Hagar,...similarly belonging to their masculine partner and ending in tragedy. Ryna purportedly goes insane, crying endlessly after Solomon leaves her, whereas Hagar's misery leads her murderous attempts on her unrequited love, Milkman, eventually concluding in her own suicide.¹¹

So within the framework of womanism such female figures are influential. Pilate is especially significant and can also be seen as the protagonist of *Song of Solomon* because she is the novel's moral guide. She may be argued to be a representative of the females that could be considered as womanist. Although the narrator rarely focuses on what she feels or thinks in the novel, Pilate's presence is felt everywhere in the novel. She is also abandoned by her brother who disregards her after the murdering of their father, though he proves to be still influenced by her when once he suffered loneliness and distraction.

...It was this feeling of loneliness that made him decide to take a shortcut back to Not Doctor Street, even though to do so would lead him past his sister's house. He crossed a yard and followed a fence that led into Darling Street where Pilate lived in a narrow single-story house whose basement seemed to be rising from rather than settling into the ground. She had no electricity because she would not pay for the service. Nor for gas. At night she and her daughter lit the house with candles and kerosene lamps; they warmed themselves and cooked with wood and coal, pumped kitchen water into a dry sink through a pipeline from a well and lived pretty much as though progress was a word that meant walking a little farther on down the road. (Morrison: 56-57)

Here Morrison shows a remarkable contrast between two worlds, the place where Macon lives and his sister's. This contrast emphasizes the materialistic, cold and disgusting reality of wealth and greed overriding Macon and the spiritual warm resort that Pilate's house represents. Although her house is a narrow single-story house situated eighty feet from the sidewalk and lit not by electricity but candles and kerosene lamps, it is described with so ample details that it looks animated.

Pilate proved to be strong and could survive. Her father, Macon, named her after the Roman statesman who, according to the New Testament, ordered Jesus' crucifixion:

He had cooperated as a young father with the blind selection of names from the Bible for every child other than the first male. And abided by whatever the finger pointed to... How he had copied the group of letters out on a piece of brown paper; copied, as illiterate people do, every curlicue, arch, and bend in the letters, and presented it to the midwife.

"That's the baby's name."

"You want this for the baby's name?"

"I want that for the baby's name. Say it."

"You can't name the baby this."

"Say it."

"It's a man's name."

"Say it."

"Pilate."

"What?"

"Pilate. You wrote down Pilate."

"Like a riverboat pilot?"

"No. Not like no riverboat pilot. Like a Christ-killing Pilate.

You can't get much worse than that for a name. And a baby girl at that."

"That's where my finger went down at." (Morrison: 42-43)

It is argued that Pilate's name, though randomly chosen, becomes a symbol of his defiant anger toward Christ who had not saved his wife, Pilate's mother. In spite of this name Pilate is completely different because she is incapable of cruelty. She frequently leads those who are in need of guidance, such as Milkman, during his spiritual journey. Her home is like a shelter especially for her daughter, Reba and granddaughter, Hagar. When Milkman and Guitar come to her house one day to know more about her because his father used to prevent him, they find something completely different. Morrison describes the place as a haven. He expects to find his aunt poor, dirty and drunk as "his sixth-grade schoolmates teased him about her and whom he hated because he felt personally responsible for her ugliness, her poverty, her dirt, and her wine". (Morrison: 73). What he finds out is a poor but strong-willed and self-confident woman sitting on the front steps:

And while she looked as poor as everyone said she was, something was missing from her eyes that should have confirmed it. Nor was she dirty; unkempt, yes, but not dirty. The whites of her fingernails were like ivory. And unless he knew absolutely nothing, this woman was definitely not drunk. Of course she was anything but pretty, yet he knew he could have watched her all day... And when she stood up, he all but gasped. She was as tall as his father, head and shoulders taller than himself. (Morrison: 73-74).

When she speaks she is so direct that they almost keep spell-bound and attentive. Morrison concentrates on the influence of the Pilate's household on Milkman. We read that it is the first time in his life that he remembers being completely happy and "He was sitting comfortably in the notorious wine house; he was surrounded by women who seemed to enjoy him and who laughed out loud. And he was in love. No wonder

his father was afraid of them." (Morrison: 89). She is often considered as different and alienated from others just because she was born without a navel, "It was the absence of a navel that convinced people that she had not come into this world through normal channels; had never lain, floated, or grown in some warm and liquid place connected by a tissue-thin tube to a reliable source of human nourishment"(Morrison:57).

Pilate is moreover a survivor of the same racism that has embittered Macon Jr. and Milkman. She is nevertheless loving and selfless. Pilate's loving nature does not connote weakness but rather strength. Even though she is in her sixties she pushes a knife within an inch of Reba's abuser heart and threatens him never to touch Reba again. Morrison suggests that Pilate's supernatural powers, great strength, lasting youthfulness, and boundless love come from African-American cultural traditions. Although Pilate suffers the same disadvantages as Macon Jr., she is still able to preserve a link to her family's forgotten past. 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. Even her Macon Jr., who denied her, secretly comes by her house one night to listen to her singing with her daughter and granddaughter.

Near the window, hidden by the dark, he felt the irritability of the day drain from him and relished the effortless beauty of the women singing in the candlelight...He knew her face better than he knew his own. Singing now, her face would be a mask; all emotion and passion would have left her features and entered her voice... As Macon felt himself softening under the weight of memory and music, the song died down. The air was quiet and yet Macon Dead could not leave. He liked looking at them freely this way. They didn't move. They simply stopped singing and Reba went on paring her toenails, Hagar threaded and unthreaded her hair, and Pilate swayed like a willow over her stirring. (Morrison: 60-61)

Her songs help Milkman to find his ancestral home, Shalimar. Indeed, as Milkman realizes at the end of his journey, Pilate is the only human being he knows who is able to fly without ever leaving the ground. That is, she is already liberated and does not need to escape to attain freedom. Ultimately, Pilate in *Song of Solomon* becomes the novel's model character, showing that strength does not have to come at the expense of gentleness, and that personal freedom is not necessarily compromised by love for others. 12

Pilate Dead who cherishes the past and her ancestors as a dynamic and useful source of information does not fully understand the information she possesses. She appreciates that the information she has, even if incomprehensible, has value and worth. She is unaware that she acts as a guide, but, nonetheless she provides Milkman

Dead with the means to transcend his own limitations and narrowed vision through her unintentional revelation of what she knows of the Dead family narrative.

Pilate lived her life in defiance of traditional definitions of womanhood. Her birth from a dead mother and her maturation without a navel reinforces her metaphysical and psychological independence. This pervasive but superficial connection demonstrates that a person's name is but one element in the definition of his or her identity. 13

Notes

1. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens. Womanist Prose* (1972), p.405)
2. Alice Walker, p.401
3. Patricia Hill Collins, *What's in a Name? Womanism, Black Feminism, and Beyond*. 2001, p.9)
4. Janiece L. Blackmon, "I Am Because We Are: Africana Womanism as a Vehicle of Empowerment and Influence", Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 2008, p.1.
5. Carmen Mojica, *Feminism and Womanism, GAB Gender Across Borders*, <http://www.aglobalvoiceforgenderjustice.com>, accessed: 20/7/2013).
6. Nellie McKay, *An Interview with Toni Morrison*, University of Wisconsin Press, accessed: 11/8/2013, Iraqi Virtual Library, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1208128>, pp.415-16.
7. Nellie McKay, p.416.
8. *ibid*, p.10
9. See also Nikol G. Alexander-Floyd and Evelyn M. Simien, *Revisiting "What's in a Name?" Exploring the Contours of Africana Womanist Thought*, University of Nebraska Press, 2006, Access provided by Iraq Virtual Science Library (16 Sep 2013 03:40)
10. ReenaSanasam, *African Culture, Folklore and Myth in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon: Discovering Self Identity*. www.thecho.in . A Journal of Humanities & Social Science, 2013
11. Kalenda C. Eaton, *Womanism, Literature, and the Transformation of the Black Community, 1965-1980*, London, Routledge, 2008, p.30)
12. Ashley Pond, *Toni Morrison: Womanist in What Light, by What Right (or Left)?*, 2009: Occidental College, p.8

13. Carmen Gillespie, *Critical Companion to Toni Morrison: A Literary Reference to Her Life and Work*, USA, 2008, p.186.

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