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African Culture, Folklore and Myth in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon: Discovering Self Identity*

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Abstract

The main focus of this paper is to explore the role of African myths, folklore and popular wisdom in discovering self-identity, which are arguably deployed in the novels of the Nobel Prize winning African-American writer and thinker, Toni Morrison, who is quite frequently labelled as a mythical symbolist. In Song of Solomon, Morrison stirs together folk and fairy tale, magic and root medicine, history and imagination, flight and naming for a distinctive fictional concoction. In this novel, she shows impact of slavery on the identity of African Americans and suggests how a strong and complete identity can be constructed. Thus Morrison demonstrates that both an understanding of one's heritage and ancestral past is necessary and helps to unite with own community. So the paper examines the transformation of the character, Milkman, from an unconcerned man into culturally aware African American and how the sources of Myths, folklore and cultures lay the stepping stone for the development of a complete and coherent identity.

When African People came to America, they brought their rich and colourful history, culture, folklore and myths which they inherited from their ancestors. Even though they lacked written literary tradition they had already developed and spreaded their diverse black culture since liberation from slavery. Lawrence W. Levin writes in his book, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, "derived clearly from its African roots, this oral culture existed in the music of spirituals, gospel songs,

work songs and the blues, in the folktales and in the creation of folk heroes like, legendary John Henry and the Prize fighter Joe Louis; in a ribald, self-deprecating brand of humour that was also satirical and biting in its exposure of the American racial system."¹. Under the institution of

¹ Lawrence W. Levin, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro- American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom*. New York : Oxford Univ. Press. 1977, p- 1.

slavery, many blacks had written against the whites' oppression and of its excess. While writing they included their rich past heritage and folklore to preserve their race, identity and culture. These large groups of literature written by the Americans of African descendants came to be known as African American literature. As an African American writer, Toni Morrison (the first African American to win the Nobel Prize in 1993) not only reflects the exploitation and devastation brought by slavery on the African American but also delves in the unique cultural inheritance of African Americans intermittently alluding to folklores, myths, cultural tradition, ancestral legacy, magic, fable, poetry, songs, music, and superstition. So each of her works, *The Bluest eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1998), *Love* (2003), and *A Mercy* (2008) provides insights into the complexity of African American experience and rootedness in the myths, African cultural tradition and folklore. She believes that cultural tradition, myths and folklore are the art of self-discovery. So, her characters usually go back to their past heritage to find themselves and to have better understanding of their lives. Thus Morrison demonstrates that both an understanding of one's heritage and its ancestral past is necessary and helpful in fostering unity in its own community. So the novel, *Song of Solomon*, examines the transformation of the character, Milkman, from an unconcerned man into culturally aware African American and how he embraces their ancestral root. Thus the source of Myths, folklore and cultures lay the stepping stone for the development of a complete and coherent identity of the character, Milkman Dead.

From the very beginning of the novel, the epigraph, "The fathers may soar, and the children may know their names" introduces the myths of flight and naming and as the story progresses it unfolds the mythological and cultural elements which are smoothly interwoven with the story. *Song of Solomon* is divided into two parts, firstly it focuses on Milkman's urban life in Michigan between 1931 and 1963 and the second part focuses on the search for a reputed fortune he believes will free him from his family. The novel begins with the flight of a Black insurance agent, Robert Smith, who jumps off the roof of No Mercy Hospital. At this scene we are introduced to an old woman, Pilate, who keeps on singing as she is worshipping and chanting some magical words,

*O Sugarman done fly away
Sugarman done gone
Sugarman cut across the sky
Sugarman gone home²*

The next day, Ruth Foster Dead, the daughter of the first black doctor in town, gives birth to the first black child born in Mercy Hospital; Milkman Dead who they believe is born under miraculous spell. But at age four when Milkman discovers that humans cannot fly, he loses all interest in himself and others. Although Milkman claims that gold is the ultimate goal of his journey, his motives for the gold are less convincing than his desire to seek out his family history. During his quest for gold, Milkman learns about his ancestral heritage and begins to see his past. He

². Toni Morrison. *Song of Solomon*. London: Vintage, 2005.P-6



loses his self-centeredness and discovers his self-identity.

Throughout *Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison employs many mythical elements in order to make the story more interesting. Not only she introduces African folklore, cultural heritage and myths but also includes Greek mythology, western quest myths and frustration. But Toni Morrison, in *Song of Solomon*, uses the myth of flight as a device to connect oneself to the ancestral root about Black people who could fly.

In the novel, Milkman discovers that his great-grandfather, Solomon Sugarman, was also a part of a flying African tribe who flew home to Africa to escape from slavery.

Toni Morrison shows that Milkman always feels like an outcast because he is not connected to his ancestral heritage. Milkman, by embracing the ancestral roots, learns pieces of his own, allowing him, finally, to fly free—literally and figuratively. Thus the writer shows through the character, Milkman, that when we drift ourselves from our culture, root and heritage we seem to be somehow living with incomplete identity. People can adapt their way of living with the advancement of time but somehow people often look back to see what they have left behind and what they have lost, in short, it means the past can provide the solution to the problem facing today. To Morrison, the Dead family is the desirable model of surrendering to the hierarchical ideology of capitalist culture:

He asked Papa where he was born. Papa said Macon. Then he asked him who his father was. Papa said, "He's dead." Asked him who owned him, Papa said, "I'm free." Well, the Yankee

biblical allusions. Like the story of Icarus and Daedalus, the classical Greek myths, Milkman attempts freedom with wings given through ancestral heritage. Some critics suggests, however, that to be able to fly do not mean that one has achieved transcendence but it can also be considered as suicide in order to free oneself from oppression and wrote it all own, but in the wrong spaces . . . and in the space for his name the fool wrote, "Dead" comma "Macon."³

Just like the name, Dead family has no sense of its ancestral knowledge and lacks interest in human connection which creates an unstable life among the family. As Philip Page observes: "Without their name (Solomon) and the wisdom it implies, the Dead's are ignorant of their ancestry, and hence of themselves, and they are alienated from their community, each other, and themselves."⁴ But with the character like Pilate and Circe, Morrison also reflects that even in industrial and civilised world one can transcend to the natural world. Pilate embodies all that is truly natural. Her pebbly voice, woodsy smell, ability to read earth and sky and 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. Milkman, like Odysseus, set out his

³ Ibid p.53

⁴ P. Page (Dangerous Freedom: Fusion and Fragmentation in Toni Morrison's Novels [Jackson, Miss., 1995] 98), for instance, relies on "the monomyth of the hero's quest as delineated by Joseph Campbell and Otto Rank." P- 86.



heroic quest from North to South because it is in South where his familial ancestral legacy, the importance of journey, lies.

Culture, myth and folklore are mediums used by self-emancipated begins with Milkman's complete isolation from the Black community the heritage, culture and root. His journey to his ancestral homeland has enabled him to appreciate and understand the importance of the name of things, place and people, and to connect them back to himself. Considering the study above it can be inferred that culture, folklore and myths form an integral part of the self and racial consciousness of any individual within his social structure. Thus, Morrison demonstrates that it is by individual desire that one accepts the responsibility to respect and preserve the cultural heritage which makes him/her an integral part of one's ancestor and

Africans to continue the ideology and ethos of freedom. Asante, in his book *The Afrocentric Idea (1987)*, says that the task of African American is to find the myths that have developed in our history. Although *Song of Solomon* novel ends with his open embrace of an African American

helps to construct self-identity. Her *Song of Solomon* is also infused with western myths and folklore as well as classic fairy tales, fables and folk music. Morrison thus often draws on myths, folklore and culture, with many of her characters showing them directly or indirectly influenced by these sources. Therefore we can conclude that Milkman affirms his relation to Solomon and Pilate, and joins them in their mystic and elemental flight, and finally attains his self-identity.

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