

DISCOURSE OF SOCIO-ECONOMIC ACCLIMATION IN TONI MORRISON'S *SONG OF SOLOMON*

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Abstract:

This paper deals with how Morrison brings into focus the socio-economic condition of the blacks and how they wish to follow white's social hierarchy in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. *Song of Solomon* provides an instance of the manner in which equations of power, class, gender and race operate in the White Society. The story of the novel traces the four generations of blacks, starting with Macon Dead Jr. who is also referred to as Milkman in the novel. Milkman travels to South in search of a family's hidden treasures of gold. But in the process, he traces his roots and searches his true identity. Through his hunt to the South, Morrison traces the history of black immigration from male perspective.

Keywords: Black, White, Family, Society, Economics, Hierarchy, Pain

Discourse of Socio-Economic Acclimation in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*

Toni Morrison is the most sophisticated novelist in the history of African-American Literature. In her literary works she daringly portrays not only the sorry state of affairs in which blacks found themselves in but also reveals the beauty and hope beneath the surface of blacks' sufferings in America. Morrison stands as a towering world literary personality and a symbol of African-American and a dedicated champion in the cause of liberation from oppression for the black race and at the same time she believes that human beings from different cultural and social milieu, and different races can live harmoniously together provided each one understands the other as a human being throbbing with all sensibilities, which would ultimately create human environment wherein peace alone would pervade.

Morrison having dwelt at length the socio economic and oppressing conditions of blacks in U.S., examines in this novel *Song of Solomon* what exactly suppresses the rise of blacks in the alien soil. The black's social organisation itself is one of the causes for its backwardness in all spheres of life. The novel narrates the life of a black family Macon Dead, his wife, Ruth Foster, and their children. Capitalist and racist strategies focus how the whites as well as blacks try to culturally destabilise these work systematically to erode the marginalised groups' cultural subordinate groups. The pet ideologies like superiority of race, class and heritage and economic uprising.

Song of Solomon is Morrison's conscious effort to reveal her view on the conditions of the blacks. She is fully convinced that capitalism thwarted the growth of blacks as

independent beings free from economic setbacks. She is very much interested in creating an awareness among the blacks the need for becoming self-reliant and economically progressive race if not capitalists. Each narrative of the novel corresponds to the development of hero. In this novel Milkman becomes the symbol of black race and its frail economic status.

In a way Morrison feels that class consciousness and oppression in America is a social virus which affected both the white and black people. The black women bore the brunt of the oppression as the white men treated black women not only as slaves but also for their biological uncommon urges. For the first time in her novel, she makes a male protagonist who realises that his people need a new orientation to their lifestyle and towards better economic conditions. This in turn gives a clear mind that he has first to overcome class oppression and the second is that he has to maintain a good relationship with a woman. The whole idea behind such changed equations is to show that black women were victims of oppression at the hands of white capitalists. Morrison discovers the cause of the African oppression to which her own people are responsible. She wants to eradicate this malady from the black social structure.

One of the bold attempts of Morrison in *Song of Solomon* is to show the nature of African oppression in America which is due to acquired social consciousness of black people and their first onslaught upon black people has caused enough havoc and they have been used by the whites in a more skilful manner. It is Morrison's qualitative attempt in her work in realistic terms. She wants first the black male should realise and rise up. Guitar's speech to Milkman shows the pent-up emotion coming to the fore. Milkman raised his eyebrows. He thought Guitar was going to let him in on some deal he had going. But he was slipping into his race bag. Guitar is spellbound and speechless for a moment at the change of mind in which Milkman chooses his course of action against the white people. Milkman represents consciousness of the black race but there course he chooses to release his clan from the clutches of the white race something which needs to be condemned and abhorred. In the initial stage his behaviour was worse than a male chauvinist.

Morrison brings out a clear distinction between class and community and between autonomy and self-absorption. This concept is very well presented by the towering figure of Pilate who transcends class distinction and yet is the embodiment of the spirit of his community. By making Ruth and Pilate come together, Morrison suggests that effect of the class distinctions and the social and community fragmentation may be overcome by women in their overriding concern for the living.

Morrison in *Song of Solomon* more concerned with the status and existence of upper middle class than class and gender in general terms. Being the only daughter of a black doctor in the town, Ruth is bred to an upper middle-class existence. She is presented in the novel as the underside of the ideal southern lady image. She is cut off from life, imprisoned by the father's false ideals and he wants his daughter to be a doll. Her husband has married her because of her status. Ruth's life becomes a waste because of her father's ideals upon which she is bred. Pilate is the embodiment of her family's tradition whereas Ruth is the symbol of class structure. Morrison portrays these two characters in a contrasting way:

They were so different, those two women. One black, the other lemony. One corseted

the other buck necked under her dress. One was read but ill travelled. The other had read only a geography book, but had been from one end of the country to another. One wholly dependent on money for life, the other indifferent to it. But those were the meaningless things. Their similarities were profound. Both were vitally interested in Macon Dead's son and both had close and supportive posthumous communication with their fathers. Pilate showers abundant love on Milkman. He feels for the first time in his life that he remembered being completely happy.

It is because Pilate turned him towards a conscious direction and he is made to lead a comfortable human life. Through her acknowledgement of dignity in and pride of her African we see her lacking in material wealth. Milkman gets his first lesson in race and class consciousness. Like Pilate, Milkman must learn to respect his African self and to realise that money does not ensure happiness. It is she who first forces him to confront his identity as a human being who sucks the life force from his people and learns from her the meaning of life.

Milkman's tutelage under Aunt Pilate, her turning him towards the past, becomes a question of reconstituting his values. According to Charles Taylor, a moral orientation is linked to identity: "To know who you are is to be oriented in moral space, a space in which questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what not, what has meaning and importance for you and what is trivial and secondary" (Quoted in "The Past Imperfect," 249). Morrison addresses her middle-class protagonist not to bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism.

Although the protagonist is a male, the novel reassesses the legacy of the fine fathers from Pilate's daughter's perspective. Morrison describes *Song of Solomon* as 'a journey from stupidity to epiphany, of a man, a complete man'. He is spurred on to his journey toward maturity by his sister Lena's furious ultimatum: 'you are a sad, pitiful, stupid, selfish, hateful man. I hope your little long's gut stands you in good stead, and that you take good care of it, because you don't have anything else. But I want to give you notice. (Morrison's "The Site of Memory," 124)

The first part of the novel set in the North, makes us experience Milkman's life of partial narratives; the second half takes us to the South, where the present can be related to the past and where Milkman can together all his stories to make single, meaningful narrative. Morrison's narrative is cyclical in structure. The novel develops its meaning through the trip of a progressive return to the past. Morrison takes the bourgeois art form read in isolation and transforms it so that it does not become a performance containing counsel and wisdom. The novel performs the linkage between generations.

Song of Solomon is a novel that actively reconstructs the meaning of blackness and as such it belongs to the group of novels that have documented and refashioned ethnic identities in the United States since the 1970s. In this respect a novel becomes a mode of retrieving a 'usable past' as well as documenting a history. Milkman's family name is significant in more ways than one: first because it falsifies their origins as well as the identities thrust upon them by a federal agent, the name is a living testimony to the dominant cultures' disregard of

any history of identity other than its own; second, it signifies the attitude of the black middle class toward the slave past they would rather consign it to oblivion than let it persist as a humiliating reminder. If the flying ancestors' flight from slavery is an escape from responsibilities to the women and children left behind, the subsequent flight of the African American middle-class is represented as another form of escape. Referring to the attitude of blacks in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Morrison notes:

In the legitimate and necessary drive for better jobs and housing, we abandoned the past and a lot of the truth and substance that went with it ... In trying to cure the cancer of slavery and its consequences, some healthy as well as malignant cells were destroyed... the point is not to soak in some warm bath of nostalgia about the good old days there were none ... but to recognise and rescue those qualities of resistance, excellence and integrity that were so much a part of our past and so useful to us. ("The Site of Memory," 129)

The entire novel is about the interdependence of individuals and the insurance of mutual life; redemption cannot be individual. Pilate prevents Milkman from seeking flight from his responsibilities, from perpetuating the history of neglect. He wants the past must be understood and re-evaluated for progress into the present.

The women in *Song of Solomon* become the gauge by which one can measure Milkman's maturing race and class consciousness. Pilate's role in the novel is dialectically related to Milkman's developing consciousness. He also is a unifying link of the past African culture and present Afro-American culture, but in the end again orients towards pure black culture which ultimately becomes his conscious turning point for his past and future. Pilate symbolises the bridge that connects the two. She is the ultimate source, the base from which Milkman must build his race and class consciousness. Initial low-level consciousness of Milkman is due to his confused state of mind and his association with things behind him. As he does not know of his past, he is uncertain of his future. "Infinite possibilities and enormous responsibilities - stretched out before him, but he was not prepared to take advantage of the former, or accept the burden of the latter" (68). He fails to understand that responsibilities are an integral part of life. He is on the horns of dilemma whether to go forward or to move backward. His better state of confusion and his subsequent decision to immerse himself in the life of his people - show his moral dilemma.

In the novel *Song of Solomon*, Morrison shows the general characteristics associated with Milkman to prove his race and class consciousness. His race consciousness clearly reveals his relationship with his local community as well as his awareness of national events that affect African people. When Milkman learns that his community people are constantly subject to brutal attack at the hands of whites, he develops race consciousness which allows him to see himself and other African people as one, having a common history and identity and also struggle as well. His consciousness grows well when he questions the people and events around him. He questions 'everybody' and discovers the answers to crucial questions of identity. Once he develops his race consciousness, he sheds his sexist views of women. As a

changed man, Milkman sees woman as his equal and understands his reciprocal nature of human relationships. The most significant evidence of Milkman's awareness of the principle of reciprocity as related to women in his commitment to guide Pilate to Shalimar to bury her father's bones, dusts as she had guided him to bury the dead in him. With his revolutionised consciousness, Milkman becomes the pilot, the source of life. Thus, he is transformed to signify positive side of human side for progress of the individual which in turn will help grow his race for better status.

In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman passes through various phases of life and ultimately learns about different stages of black American history, as his own family's history is embedded in it. He slowly develops a historical consciousness and the history of his family becomes his heritage. After having acquired such consciousness, he grows emotionally and spiritually. He is a changed man and realises all his sins which he committed in ignorance. Now he is an awakened being, capable of perceiving good and bad and to act with mental equipoise. Pilate is dead, but Milkman has inherited her mantle of honesty, wisdom and clear-sightedness. With his changed character, all his attitudes towards the society changes, he acquires a new mental orientation and discovers that there is hope for the future and that Pilate's prophecy comes true that one day Milkman would change his character for the good of the society to which he belongs to.

Song of Solomon centres on Milkman Dead's unwitting search for identity. Milkman appears to be doomed to a life of alienation from himself and from others because, like his parents, he adheres to excessively rigid, materialistic, Western values and an attendant linear conception of time. During a trip to his ancestral home, however, Milkman discovers his own capacity for emotional expansiveness and learns to perceive the passage of time as a cyclical process. When he incorporates both his familial and his personal history into his sense of the present, he repairs his feelings of fragmentation and comprehends for the first time the coherence of his own life.

Milkman's father, Macon Dead, Jr., is a quintessential self-made man orphaned and disinherited in his adolescence, he wheeled and dealt his way into his position as the richest black man in town. Milkman can therefore brag about his father's houses, cars, assets and speculations. The avid materialism and rugged individualism that made Macon financially successful have exacted their price from him in other ways however. Macon has come to believe that money, property and keys are what is real in the world, his financial success has thus cost him his capacity for communication and emotion.

The Macon Dead exemplifies the patriarchal, nuclear family that has been traditionally a stable and critical feature not only of American society, but of Western civilization in general. The primary institution for the reproduction and maintenance of children, ideally it provides the individual with the means for understanding his or her place in the world. The degeneration of the Dead family, and the destructiveness of Macon's rugged individualism, symbolize the invalidity of American indeed Western values, Morrison's depiction of this family demonstrates the incompatibility of received assumptions and the texture and demands of life in black American communities.

Finally, however, Milkman's discovery of his identity lies not so much in his connection with the earth, or in his ability to understand his own past: these accomplishments only attend his greater achievement -learning to complete, to understand and to sing his family song. Milkman comes to know fully who he is when he can supply the lyrics to the song Pilate has only partially known. Throughout his life, Milkman has had an inexplicable fascination with flight. Robert Smith's abortive attempt to fly from the hospital roof precipitated his birth. Riding backward makes him uncomfortable because it reminds him of "flying blind, and not knowing where he is going". And as he approaches Circe's house, he recalls his recurring childhood fantasy of being able to take flight. When Milkman knows the entire song, however and can sing it to Pilate as she has sung it to others, he can assume his destiny. Flight is no longer a fantasy that haunts him, appearing unsummoned in his consciousness. He now understands it as a significant action from his ancestral past. Indeed, the ultimate sign of his achievement of identity is his ability to take flight in the way his grandfather did. In the process of assuming himself, Milkman discovers that his dreams have become attainable.

Milkman acquires a sense of identity when he immerses himself in his extended past. He comes full round from the individualism his father represents and advocates. Assuming identity is thus a communal gesture in this novel, as, indeed, Morrison suggests in her two earlier novels. Knowing oneself derives from learning to reach back into history and horizontally in sympathetic relationship to others. Milkman bursts the bonds of the Western, individualistic conception of self, accepting in its place the richness and complexity of a collective sense of identity.

The former slaves' desire for forgetfulness notwithstanding, the past will not be kept at bay. The slightest sensation triggers memories that overwhelm. The novel problematizes the characters' adversarial relationship to their past, explores what it means for them to confront the history of their suffering, and considers, additionally, what it means to move beyond that past. Perhaps most importantly it considers the place of black bodies in the construction of narratives of slavery.

In *Song of Solomon* what Milkman brings back to his community is the very essence of meaning of the novel and Morrison's ideal as well. She created the character in order to inculcate in the minds of black people in particular and for other race in general that every individual must develop both class and race awareness prior to developing an egalitarian and humanistic view of people in general. She also reflects her own increased consciousness of the dialectical relationship between the African male's native class oppression and in the white's society total oppression against the race and they are well analysed in a progressive manner. Morrison's conscious development of her pet theme in this concept of amelioration of black race first and later that the progress and development must proceed a viable solution with the sole aim being that both the races must live together. It is her awareness of the dialectical relationship between African men and women in white America.

In *Song of Solomon*, finally Milkman understands his quest and wants to change his attitude towards his own race with a strong mind that he should work for the benefit of his

race. He begins to understand the black psyche. With an enlarged consciousness, he understands the black problem in a white society. He perceives how equations of power operate at the levels of class, race and gender. He learns to identify himself with the black masses and wants to be useful to them in every possible way.

Morrison brings into focus the capitalist's exploitation of black races as they are voiceless people or whose voice has been systematically suppressed and to which black for a pretty long time remained mute. Their consciousness being awakened by stages through the writings of their conscious writers which ultimately made them aware of their place in a human society as human beings not as slaves. Subsequently they are made to realise by Morrison that black's oppression is not only due to their colour but beyond which what operates in the worst form is capitalism. She advocated that they should thwart the capitalist forces which created the worst social disorder in the human society. She believed that both the black and white can live together once they overcome the capitalist tendency and race consciousness.

In Morrison's novels women experience so much of anguish because of certain restrictions imposed upon them. Unlike many white women, whose lives are defined by the private domain of home and family, the majority of black women, sad, for historical reasons, greater access to the public sphere of work. Like working class women in any patriarchal society, the black women have culturally and ideologically accepted the power and control of their men, however powerless or oppressed the latter may be outside the home. Social and economic conditions make the black people as subdued beings. Once they realize their potential strength, they can overcome the setback and would become a force to be reckoned with in the white society.

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