

Journey to Ancestry: Reclaiming of Identity and Home in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*

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Abstract-*Journeys play a vital role in the lives of African Americans insofar as their quest for home in America is concerned. These journeys substantially contribute to their understanding of the impact of slavery and racism on themselves and their ancestors without which they are not in a position to materialize their dream for a viable home and identity. 'Memory' and 're-memory' help them to evoke traumas that their ancestors had undergone and compare the same with their firsthand traumas in the present. These journeys thus enable them to get matured and knowledgeable so that they can adapt themselves to the new condition. The paper is an attempt to explore in a better way Toni Morrison's representation of pain and pleasure of such journeys in her novel *Song of Solomon*, which enable her black characters to reconstruct their identities and regain self-esteem so that they find themselves in a position to make home possible.*

Keywords-*Journey; Ancestry; Reclaim; Identity; Home*

1. INTRODUCTION

Highlighting the importance of journeys for African Americans across different spatial scales, Toni Morrison in some of her novels shows how these journeys make them enlightened, empowered and matured enough to look for a better future and a viable home. Through the journeys undertaken by her black characters, Morrison exposes the unpredictable possibilities awaiting such undertakings. She exposes the pain and pleasure of such journeys, which enable her characters to reconstruct their identities and regain self-esteem so that they find themselves in a position to make home possible. Journey has been conceived as a central metaphor for both encountering and overcoming barriers to making a viable home and identity. Morrison makes us believe that for African Americans home making through journey can be made possible by mutual assistance and positive gestures on their part both in the individual and community levels.

Slavery leaves a legacy of bitter-sweet memory for African Americans. Their journeys from one place to another make them encounter different homes. Memories, both debilitating and soothing, contribute a lot towards envisioning an America free of racism. While the debilitating memories of the past always make them conscious about the necessity of guarding themselves against any future onslaught of racism, soothing memories encourage them to look forward to an America where home can be made possible through an assertion of their subjectivity. It is through journeys that African Americans can gather a lot of experiences relating to subjugation and freedom. Consequently, they get matured enough to undertake positive attitudes and practical strategies in

order to consolidate their communal solidarity for establishing and/or reclaiming home.

For African Americans, the journey is either a “forced displacement” or “a voluntary journey of discovery” (Upstone 59). This displacement either makes them homeless or situates them in a more vulnerable predicament. They, in turn, have to put up a resistance to such appropriation of space either by imagining and creating new homes or by reclaiming or returning to their old homes. Since journeying across spaces is the destiny of these people, they are steered toward a predicament where they find themselves in a dilemma as to what to accept and what to reject. ‘Memory’ and ‘re-memory’, however, help them adapt themselves to the new condition. Highlighting the importance of the journey in postcolonial narratives, Sara Upstone notes:

For what we find in the postcolonial narrative is often a new kind of journey: one with no final arrival or departure, without the desire for settlement but instead filled with the potential of constant, chaotic movement. Such a journey may mimic the colonial travel that precedes it but, as it does so, it will strategically unravel the very principles that such an original journey is based upon (59).

Although stuffed with ambivalences, such journeys undertaken by African Americans offer them necessary dislocation leading to their relocation in places where homing desire can take concrete shape through mutual love and community camaraderie. This is made possible in the margin of community life from where they can

scrutinize the centre to build up a connection to it without sacrificing their essential racial differences in the name of assimilation. As bell hooks maintains, “marginality is much more than a site of deprivation ... it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance” (149). In *Yearning* she seems to propose what Edward Soja calls “the dialectically open logic of both/and also. . . .” that goes beyond the binary options of assimilation and rebellion to a kind of “third space”, which offers African-Americans the possibility of retaining their black identity while living under the gaze of the white culture (60).

The paper is an attempt to explore the ambivalences associated with the journeys undertaken by African Americans to their ancestry, epitomized by the South, for reclaiming and redeeming home and identity. For this purpose Toni Morrison’s novel *Song of Solomon* has been taken up for discussion. Morrison here takes pain to present multiple facets of these journeys undertaken by her African American characters.

2. ANALYSES AND DISCUSSIONS

In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman’s journey to his ancestry acquaints him with the myth of flight associated with his great grandfather Solomon and provides him with the opportunity to interact with the community of African descent. The difference between Sethe’s journey in *Beloved* and that of Milkman is that whereas the former is a female traveller journeying from the past to the present, the latter is a male traveller taking up a journey to his past from the present. Both the journeys help the travellers to have the taste of freedom, and, in each case, the travelers are guided by a woman – Amy in case of Sethe and Pilate in case of Milkman. By making the two women guide two travelers, Morrison deconstructs the colonial prejudice about journey as an exclusively male oriented adventure.

What Solomon’s mythical flight underscores is the fact that African Americans are destined to undertake journeys back and forth across spatial scales—from the South to the North, and then back to the South ; from Africa to America, and vice versa. Solomon’s physical act of flying back to Africa as a representative of the “flying African children”, preserved and passed on from generations to generations through a song, also implies a mental flight (journey) to African ancestry. This psychic aspect of the flight is exemplified by Pilate’s ability to fly “without ever leaving the ground” (*Song* 321, 335). But in order to acquire that ability one must take up physical journey first. Pilate, for instance, had been journeying from one part of the country to another (140). This made her so empowered that she, in spite of being almost illiterate, was able to guide a well-educated young man like Milkman in undertaking his journey back to his root, a physical journey made basically on foot, and regaining his sense of self and identity.

The colonial journey starts with the idea of ‘absolute space’ which is later turned into ‘relativized space’

through mapping and subsequent appropriation of that space. Demarcation of boundary and exploration of treasure in different forms become the epitome of colonial journey. Postcolonial representation of colonial journey, on the other hand, foregrounds the erased and unrepresented history relating to such journey. In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman initially starts his journey in search of treasure following a roadmap highlighting territorial demarcation and “sign posts”. The journey turns out to be a failure in the colonial sense of unearthing hidden treasure. But from a postcolonial point of view, the journey is meaningful in the sense that it has been able to trace the erased history of his ancestry, which is tantamount to unearthing the most valuable treasure for Milkman. He discovers his past replete with the history of his ancestor Solomon’s mythical ability to fly. At the same time, he regains his selfhood and identity on the basis of which he might be able to make a home possible for him in the otherwise segregating and tormenting atmosphere he encounters in his present location in an urban setting. But this journey back to his ancestry is replete with ambivalences. His quest for financial gain gives way to a quest for his African ancestry evoking in his mind a vague picture of an “imaginary homeland” where the descendents of his ancestors are expected to welcome him back home. But, ironically, he finds himself “unknown, unloved, and damn near killed” (*Song* 271). The realist in Morrison does not allow herself to sentimentalize on the achievements of such journeys and provide a final solution to the problem of the black’s homing desire. Instead of making Milkman settle in the South, the ‘mini-Africa’, Morrison makes him come back to the North, the mainstream white America. What she perhaps suggests is that such journeys undertaken by African Americans may be enlightening and empowering, but they negate any “idealized return” to their ancestral “homeland”. With the empowered self, regained subjectivity, and the realization of the rootedness of identity, which are the byproducts of such journeys, African Americans can look forward to a viable home in a community constantly in guard against inverted racism and sexism.

Any attempt by individual African-Americans to move to the centre transcending the centre/margin dichotomy does not, of course, absolve them of the “shared history” of trauma. It is through their discovery of the impossibility of escaping the legacy of spatial discrimination of slavery that they can be in a position to build a future. In other words, African-Americans have to be in a constant move back and forth from the margin to the centre and vice versa in order to reclaim and redeem the past so as to make possible a better future for them. Those who are able to make a balance between the oppositional pulls of centre and margin can resist co-optation and blind assimilation and counteract the sense of loss of subjectivity and solidarity. Such traces of upholding alterity can be discovered in Milkman’s reclaiming and redeeming of his ancestral past through his journey from his place of privilege to his ancestral place. The coming of age of

Milkman through the uncovering of his past, in spite of having grown up affluent and educated, is a positive step toward building a sustainable future for him.

Milkman's journey to his ancestry to trace the genealogy of his family is also a journey to discover his past. He reconstructs the history from firsthand experience occasioned by his direct interaction with the black community, which is the store house of shared trauma as well as healing epitomized by the song of Solomon. This journey is necessary for Milkman to revive the black culture and connectedness erased by the larger white group so as to establish cultural and family link indispensable for reclaiming identity and home.

It is always important for the black to develop a counter-hegemonic discourse, even though it may be in a symbolic and tacit level. This is evident from the white culture's edict that the naming of Main Avenue as "Doctor Street" is not officially acceptable and the black community's renaming of it as "Not Doctor Street". It is a strategic move "to keep their memories alive and please the city legislatures as well" (*Song 4*). Such counter spaces are produced by the collective efforts of the community. It is, therefore, equally important to discover the traces of such counter-hegemonic moves on the part of other black communities so as to reinforce communal unity and solidarity erased by the white culture. With a view to projecting the black as Other, the white culture constantly tries to conceal subjectivity and connectedness of the black. Milkman's journey to his ancestral past is significant in the backdrop of such a legacy of discrimination and "othering" exerted on the black since the old days of slavery.

In order to have control over his anxiety evolving out of his encounter with racial discrimination in the postcolonial urban America, Milkman must undertake a journey to his ancestry. Such a journey helps him to get matured enough to tackle such discriminative practices in the manner his ancestors did during slavery. Solomon's act of flying to escape slavery and Pilate's ability to fly without leaving the place are glorious examples of resistance having the potential to inspire the subsequent generations to produce counter spaces from which they can offset discrimination of racism. Unless one is aware of the legacy of slavery and racism, such counterbalancing, which might sometimes turn out to be self-defeating, is not possible. Milkman learnt this lesson from his journey to his ancestry. This knowledge makes him a full grown person to envision a home under the soothing and caring touch of the family and the community in an otherwise hostile environment.

Born and brought up in a suffocating atmosphere with little freedom to live a life according to their wishes, the members of Macon Dead Jr's family could not convert their house into home. It is by going out of this prison house that some of its members, after interacting with the community, could acquire selfhood and hope for a viable home. Corinthians, Milkman's sister, got it in her job as a maid and in her life with Porter. Milkman got it in his interaction with the community in Shalimar and in the love

and care of Pilate. It is by leaving their house that both Milkman and Corinthians got matured enough to face the world in their own characteristic ways. In that house they lacked the positive gaze of the community because of their father's strange way of making his family live an isolated life detached from the black community.

While Morrison brings to the fore the paramount importance of the community in directing the lives of African Americans, she also focuses on some of the flaws of the community manifested in its indifference to some of its disadvantaged members. In spite of Pilate's willingness to mix up with the community instead of living an isolated life like her brother, Macon Dead Jr., the community rejects her in the pretext of the deformity of her body. Since she is born without a navel, she is considered an evil. She is deprived of all family and communal support so much so that she has to live an isolated life relying absolutely on herself and nobody else. But while Macon Dead Jr's house remains a house in spite of his affluence, Pilate converts her house into home by opening up her home and heart to everyone who seeks her help and guidance. Milkman captures the unique qualities of Pilate's home in his recollection of that place called home while he was in Shalimar:

[Pilate's home was] the only one he knew that achieved comfort without one article of comfort in it. No soft worn-down chair, not a cushion or a pillow. No light switch, no water running free and clear after a turn of a tap handle. No napkins, no table cloth. No fluted plates or flowered cups, no circle of blue flame burning in a stove eye. But peace was there, energy, singing and now his own remembrances" (Song 301).

The absence of the material things, which were perhaps in abundance in Macon Dead Jr's house, was compensated for by the abundance of love and care in Pilate's home. Macon Dead Jr's children never felt like belonging to their father's house which lacked, above all, freedom—freedom to lead one's life according to one's wishes and needs. As a result, they never got matured to face the world. It is by leaving the house that Milkman and Corinthians could have the knowledge necessary for confronting trauma and understanding legacy of slavery as well as its impact on black people and home. After acquiring knowledge about his ancestors through his journey to Shalimar, Milkman became matured enough to reassess his family members and show empathy to them: "Hating his parents, his sisters, seemed silly now" (*Song 306*).

While Macon Dead Jr. abandoned the community, Pilate was abandoned by the community. Neither act, Morrison seems to suggest, contributes to the welfare of either the individuals or the community. Abandonment leads to trauma of isolation which must be abandoned to lead a meaningful life. This knowledge came to Milkman through his interactions with Pilate on the one hand, and the community in Shalimar, on the other. It is, however,

interesting to note that while Pilate's guidance prevented Ruth and Milkman from getting disintegrated from the family and the community, her love and care could not protect Hagar, her granddaughter, from breaking down.

Morrison here underlines the multiple facets of African Americans' response to the complexity created by the larger culture's manipulation of their identity and ethos. As soon as one loses self-esteem and develops self-contempt, one needs support from both the family and the community. Even that may not be enough to regain one's selfhood. Hagar, for instance, could not get the better of her self-contempt in spite of all possible support from her family. What she actually needed was the support of the community, and, of course, the special love of Milkman. She can visualize a home in the company of Milkman and the support of "a chorus of mamas, grandmamas, aunts, cousins, sisters, neighbors, Sunday school teachers, best girl friends..." (Song 307). Hagar suffers from a trauma that all coloured girls are made to undergo—"self contempt". Unlike Pilate and Reba, She cannot overcome this trauma all by herself, or even by the support of his family. Milkman could realize only too late what he has done to her selfhood by neglecting her womanhood. Only after his journey to Shalimar that Milkman has been able to understand the dire need of individual love and community support for the survival of African Americans in the nation space dominated by the idiosyncrasies of the larger white culture. Milkman's journey to his past makes him capable of looking back to his more recent past with an open mind. His honest reassessment of his treatment of Hagar is a case in point:

His mind turned to Hagar and how he had treated her at the end. Why did he never sit her down and talk to her? Honestly. And what ugly thing was it he said to her the last time she tried to kill him? And God, how hollow her eyes had looked. He was never frightened of her; he never actually believed that she would succeed in killing him or that she really wanted to.... Oh, she could have accidentally hurt him, but he could have stopped her in any number of ways. But he hadn't wanted to. He had used her—her love, her craziness—and most of all he had used her skulking, bitter vengeance (301).

What Morrison brings home is that whatever reaction an African American shows to a particular situation and how s/he responds to a stimulus are somehow or the other related to the larger culture's denigration of blacks as the 'Other' and its effect on their individual and community lives.

If a black man has education and property but, if he keeps himself and his family detached from his community, he and his family are bound to live an isolated life. Such a life is guided by phantasmagoric images and shadows of one's own memories and imagination and is cut off from down-

to-earth realities of black life in a white dominated society. In a society where "blackness" is synonymous with "otherness", "whiteness" can never be the norms for the black. By imitating white values and acquiring property and education, a black can compete with the white, but the essential racial difference still remains however much s/he might try to assimilate. Denying that essential alterity through blind imitation of white norms is tantamount to denying selfhood and subjectivity which can flourish only in the wider space of community life, not in the narrow and inhibiting space of an isolated and disjointed living.

Milkman has to make his journey to his forefather's "original home", that is Shalimar, in order to create an integrated self image of himself which is eluding him in his father's home at Danville. By listening to the song sung by the children and witnessing their play in Shalimar, Milkman relives his childhood denied to him at Danville. The song, in particular, reveals his cultural connection and kinship with the black African community in Shalimar kept integrated by the memory of Solomon, whose ability to fly back to Africa is immortalized in the song sung by the children. Milkman gradually develops a sense of rootedness that helps him to generate self-worth and identity. When he tries to decipher the meaning of the song and makes a connection between the people incorporated into the song and his ancestors, he realizes for the second time the healing power of home—the first being Pilate's home in the edge of woods—in the company of the children and other community members.

Milkman's disjuncture from the black community in his father's house comes in sharp contrast to his proactive and positive endeavors to mix up with the community in Shalimar. In Danville Milkman's education and affluence kept him away from the community. But his journey to Shalimar brought about changes in his perception of history, his attitude to his family, and his understanding of the black community. The more he learnt about his ancestors, the more mature he became. He is now in a position to create a home for him with the knowledge of his flying ancestor Solomon's occupying a legendary space in the form of the song of Shalimar. While his education and affluence kept him oblivious of his cultural past in Danville, he became more knowledgeable and flexible enough to accommodate new found truths and ideas in Shalimar. Consequently, he got connected to his own people in spite of his aristocratic upbringing.

Morrison does not, of course, project education and affluence as having negative effects on the connectedness between black and black unless the affluent and educated black fails to empathize with the weaker section of the community. What she rather suggests is that the vitality of community connection is essential for counter-acting the trauma of cultural rejection. Macon Dead Jr's rejection of the black community does not in any way help him in overcoming his past trauma. This rather intensifies his suffering. Unlike Macon, Bill Cosey in *Love*, in spite of being affluent, helps the community members to overcome their financial constraints although they are not allowed to

celebrate any occasions in his Hotel and Resort. Morrison's vote appears to have gone for Cosey for his communal consciousness, which is absolutely missing in case of Macon Dead Jr. What Bill Cosey has learnt through his interaction with the black people who used to come to his hotel as customers, and the local black community living in the vicinity, Milkman learnt through his interface with the black community in Shalimar. Both of them learnt the importance of the black community in their lives for making home possible in a chaotic world.

For Macon Dead Jr., education and property are the two main pillars that can ensure the stability of home for African Americans against their vulnerability in a white dominated society. He has learnt it from his witnessing of his father's vulnerability due to his illiteracy, and from his own experience of becoming homeless after the murder of his father by a white man. Unlike Bill Cosey, who is always ready to help the black folk, Macon Dead Jr. has no empathy for his community members. His only concern, as Milkman has observed, is to acquire property: "He just wants what they [the white] have" (*Song* 224). This, he believes, will wield a protective mechanism against his vulnerability, the fear of which he inherits as a trauma from his own father's predicament. He seems to believe that neither family nor community can protect a black from becoming hopeless and homeless.

But Milkman finds that neither education nor property can protect him from the discriminating racial practices still prevalent in post-slavery times. He realizes that living a life of an isolationist will lead him to nowhere. He believes that interactions with family and community can open up vistas for recovery from white oppression. He learnt all this through his journey to his ancestral past—a journey necessary for counter-balancing and critiquing his strategic position in the present. Verbalizing of trauma is important for reviving and reinforcing much needed community and family consciousness which is missing between Macon Dead Jr., on the one hand, and his family and the black community, on the other. If the hard-earned money and property detach a person from his family and community, life becomes miserable. Like the elders of the Ruby community in *Paradise*, Macon Dead Jr. wants his family members, particularly his son, Milkman, to follow his ideals of life. Without realizing that his son's interactions with his family and the community will shape his way of looking at and understanding of his life, Macon Dead Jr.

tries to impose his own philosophy of owning property, on his son. But once Macon Dead Jr. shares his traumas with his son, both become intimate. Milkman is now in a position to relate his father's craze for property to his past trauma of witnessing his father, Macon Dead, being tricked to naught by a white man. This sharing of traumas between father and son in fact sets the stage for the latter's subsequent journey to his ancestry.

Because Macon Dead Jr. measures everything in terms of property and money—he even disowns his sister, Pilate for what he thinks as her betrayal of him by stealing some gold—he cannot deal with trauma in the way his sister does. Unlike him, Pilate rejects white values and, living in the margin (in the woods), she harbours community values and familial ties. Macon Dead Jr's desire to move to the centre at the cost of sacrificing family and community ties comes in sharp contrast to Pilate's desire to live in the margin in order to spread black communal values. Pilate's positioning of herself in the marginal space is what bell hooks calls "choosing the margin as a space of radical openness" and "a space of resistance" (hooks 145, 149). From that marginal space she instigates and guides Milkman to undertake his journey to his ancestry.

3. CONCLUSION

We have seen that it is through their journeys that the black characters in *Song of Solomon* get knowledgeable and matured enough to meaningfully face their present predicament with the reassertion of their identities and subjectivities acquired through such journeys to their ancestry. However, Morrison foregrounds the ambivalences associated with these journeys in order to desentimentalize their achievements. She also highlights the importance of community connection brought about by such journeys for counter-acting the trauma of cultural rejection.

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