

Milkman's Loss of Cultural Identity in *Song of Solomon*

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Abstract

Song of Solomon by Toni Morrison presents the confused, miserable, and depressed living conditions of marginalized African Americans in the society dominated by the white, focusing on the quest of Milkman Dead, the protagonist in the novel. Based on Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity, this paper intends to probe into Milkman's loss of cultural identity by focusing on the control from the dominant white society, the loss of black culture and the alienation from family history.

Key words: Cultural identity; Milkman; *Song of Solomon*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison was one of the most outstanding contemporary African-American female writer. She was showered with innumerable accolades, such as Nobel Prize in literature, Pulitzer Prize for fiction, National Humanities Medal and Presidential Medal of Freedom. She had finished 11 highly-praised novels, 5 Children's books, 2 short fictions and 2 plays. Morrison had revealed the negative impact of dominant white culture on many black people, who were assimilated into the white

ideology, but unable to live in the white way they longed for due to the limitations of racial discrimination and material conditions.

Song of Solomon is the third novel of Morrison, published in 1977, winning the National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction and the American Academy and the Institute of Arts and Letters Award in 1978 (Goulimari 26-27). According to Smith, the publication of *Song of Solomon* "catapulted Morrison into the ranks of the most revered contemporary writers" (10). Since its republication in 1977, this novel has drawn extensive attention all around the world. Researches on this novel mainly focus on the conflicts between blacks and whites, feminism, African cultural heritage, and psychoanalysis. Some scholars also have carried out studies from the perspective of narratology, ecocriticism, post-colonialism, and magical realism.

In "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", Stuart Hall argues that there were two ways of defining cultural identity. The first standpoint defines cultural identity as a collective true self and a stable, continuous, and unchanging essence, with a shared ancestry and history held in common (Hall 223). The second position holds that cultural identity is "a matter of 'becoming' as well as of 'being', which is not a fixed essence but a positioning (Hall 226). Hall argues that cultural identity is "subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power" (Hall 225).

Living in a society where white culture is "central" and black culture is "marginal", Milkman was inevitably assimilated into the former. Meanwhile, because of the control from the dominant society and his alienation from family history, especially family name, Milkman had a sense of rootlessness. His cultural identity, like his face, "lacked coherence" but was "a coming together of the features into a total self" (Morrison 69). Based on Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity, this paper intends to probe into the loss of Milkman's cultural identity focusing on power, culture, and history.

2. CONTROL FROM THE DOMINANT WHITE SOCIETY

In the United States, the white actually and unquestionably belong to “the play of power, to the lines of force and consent, to the role of the dominant” (Hall 232). According to Frantz Fanon, power is a constitutive element in the construction of identities (109). For most blacks, they accepted the fact that the white were superior to themselves in the white dominant society. They did not dare to revolt against the authorities and what they expected was to go on living.

After the Emancipation Proclamation was declared and the Civil War ended, the black were promised equal rights and bright future, but the slaves in the South still suffered greatly from racial problems. Therefore, Macon's father, Jake Solomon, went to the promised north together with his wife, Sing Byrd, looked forward to “property, good solid property, the bountifulness of life” and worked hard to pursue the freedom, equality and success propagated by the white (Morrison 300). Fortunately, they succeeded in gaining some properties, among which Lincoln's Heaven, “one of the best farms in Montour County”, was the most valuable (Morrison 235). However, the farm was coveted by some greedy whites, who tricked illiterate Jake into signing a paper, swindled him out of the possessions, and killed him. Even though all the colored people knew it was the Butlers that committed the murder, no one dared to charge the Butlers with killing and plundering. They just felt thankful that Macon and Pilate had escaped.

From the perspective of Foucault, power determines and controls discourse, and is realized and expressed via discourse. The discourse imposed by the white authority constructs the inferior position of the African-American. In *Song of Solomon*, the dominant whites named the black “like race horses” (Morrison 243). When Jake went to register with the Freedmen's Bureau after the Civil War ends, a drunk Yankee registrar in the Union Army filled his personal information in the wrong place of the registry form in thoughtlessness, reflecting the dominate whites' authority over and indifference to blacks. Jake's perverse and resigned acceptance of the heavy name indicated their loss of power and their submission to the white. Besides, the black people in the town called the street where Dr. Foster, the only black doctor, lived “Doctor Street”. When the black were needed for conscription, the “Doctor Street” even became quasi-official. However, the city legislators declared that the street “had always been and would always be known as Mains Avenue and not Doctor Street” after a short while (Morrison 4). Discourse is the product of power and a form of it, and power is sustained by discourse. The controlled and selected name of the street as “Mains Avenue” reflected the dominant position of white people.

The dominant position of the white was accepted via the exertion of power. When Milkman heard about that Jake was tricked out of his property and that Jake was shot to death by some greedy whites in his childhood and early adulthood, Milkman hadn't felt angry over the injustice and suffering imposed by the dominant white at all. Besides, Milkman even regarded the racial issues as the blame the black shifted to the white shoulders and most boring.

3. ASSIMILATION TO THE DOMINANT CULTURE

Even though everyone in his family was black or brown, Milkman's family members, including Jake Solomon, Macon Dead II, his maternal grandfather, Dr. Foster and his mother, Ruth Foster, were all assimilated to the dominant white culture, and thus Milkman held the same value as his family.

Materialism is an integral part of American culture from the very beginning of its foundation. According to Richins and Dawson, materialism is a value that people attach great importance to material wealth and their acquisition (307). Living in the society dominated by the white culture, Milkman became materialistic and money-oriented.

After Jake's death, Macon and his only sister, Pilate, had no family to fall back on and nothing to depend on. After Macon killed a white man to protect Pilate from harm in a life-and-death struggle, “Life, safety, and luxury fanned out before him like the tail-spread of a peacock” the instant he saw a bag of gold (Morrison 170). Therefore, Macon Dead II began to place high emphasis on material wealth, tried to gain property in every possible way and became intent on nothing but profit. For him, the most important rule of living is to “own (Own) things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too” (Morrison 55). Macon turned against his beloved sister, Pilate, and regarded her as a snake that bit “the Farmer” for more than 50 years. After Macon killed the white man to defend her from harm, Pilate forbade Macon from taking the man's gold away, and a few days later, when he came back and found the gold was gone, he believed that Pilate privately took possession of it. In addition, to become richer, Macon called on Dr. Foster, the richest black in town, and asked for his permission to keep the company of Ruth Foster, even though he did not love Ruth at all. For Macon, the acquisition of property was of vital importance in his pursuit of happiness. On every Sunday afternoon, Macon would drive his classy and dignified car “slowly down the Not Doctor Street, through the rough part of the town...over the bypass downtown, and headed for the wealthy white neighborhoods” (Morrison 32). Macon placed great importance on the ritualized ride, aiming to show others

his success and acquiring satisfaction from the display.

When Milkman was only twelve years old, he began to work for his father, studied the business of life and learnt to own things. Influenced by the materialistic value, he placed high emphasis on money. Therefore, when he intended to run away from his repressing family, hysterical lover and boring racial problems and pursued freedom and independence, he planned to knock Pilate senseless to steal her “gold”, in spite of the fact that, his aunt was the one who brought him into the world, had looked after him and loved him from his birth on. For Milkman, money is the criterion of life. In his search for gold in Danville, Milkman ran into Circe, the one who had helped deliver Macon and Pilate and took the risk of losing her job and life to protect them from being found and killed after Jake was killed. He found that Circe lived alone in a large, desolate and bleak house, and nobody knew she was still alive but a pack of dogs. Therefore, Milkman planned to offer Circe money to leave the horrible house and to improve her terrible living condition, since he believed that money could do everything. When Milkman was completely exhausted after his vain search for gold in the cave where Macon and Pilate found the gold, a cordial and generous black driver, Fred Garnett, stopped and offered Milkman a ride and provided him with a Coke. When milkman was about to get off the car, he asked Fred that “What do I owe you? For the Coke and all?”, because in his opinion, everything was marked with certain price (Morrison 255).

In *Black Man Emerging: Facing the Past and Seizing a Future in America*, Joseph White argued that “The basic human unit is the group or tribe, not the individual person” in African culture (118). However, contrary to the collectivism advocated by the black, individualism is the core of cultural values in the United States, emphasizing that the individual is the ultimate end and individual value takes precedence over the good of society. Influenced by the prevailing individualism, Milkman was completely individualistic with regard to his black compatriots.

Macon did not care about his fellow black men but his own business, no matter what they were suffering from. For Macon, the single most important source of action and significance was his own success rather than his compatriots and the black community was just the means by which he could realize himself. Mrs. Bains, a poor black tenant that raised two orphaned grandsons on her own, tried to beg for Macon’s mercy to save some money to feed her grandsons. However, Macon mercilessly replied “Can they make it in the street, Mrs. Bains? That’s where they gonna be if you don’t figure out some way to get me my money”, without giving them a hand (Morrison 21). When Henry Porter, another tenant in the Southside, was crazy drunk in the attic window with his shotgun, Macon did not worry about his safety at all. In fact, the only thing that came to Macon was that the next day was collection day and he needed to ask for the rent before Porter’s death.

Although he drove around the town slowly on each Sunday afternoon, Macon had “hailed no one and no one hailed him”, alienated from all the others (Morrison 32).

As the only son of Macon, the notorious individualist, Milkman was somewhat excluded from the black community. At 13 years old, when Milkman went to Feather’s pool hall for a cup of beer, he was driven out with Feather shouting “Get him out of here”, because he was “Macon Dead’s boy” (Morrison 57). Milkman, like his father, attached great importance to himself and placed personal desires and requests over any others. When Till, a black boy, was stomped to death because he had whistled to a white woman and admitted that he had slept with some white women, Milkman only offered some feeble and insignificant comments, in spite of the fact that all the other blacks were extremely angry. Guitar, Milkman’s best friend, had once asked Milkman Michigan, the state where they were living, turned out to be another Montgomery, Alabama (a southern city where racial problems were much more severe than Michigan), what would he do? Milkman, as before, spared no mind to his fellow men and replied: “Buy a plane ticket” (Morrison 104). As a matter of fact, though Milkman lived in the black community, he was actually an outsider, alienated from the black community.

Influenced by the widespread materialism and individualism, class consciousness was prevailing among Milkman’s family. They attached importance to people that were advantageous to their life and business, among whom the ruling class were the most important. On the contrary, they looked down upon the inferior black who were of little benefit to themselves.

As the only black doctor, Dr. Foster, Milkman’s maternal grandfather, was worshiped by all the black in the town, but he called the African-Americans cannibals in private. When his granddaughters, Lena Dead and First Corinthians Dead, were born, what Dr. Foster cared about his granddaughters was the color of their skin. As the daughter of Dr. Foster, Ruth held the black in contempt as well. After Dr. Foster died, Ruth didn’t follow the accepted way of burying her father’s body in a black cemetery. However, she made greatest efforts to look for a cemetery that was not only for the black. In fact, the cemetery Dr. Foster lied in was only a county cemetery far away from the Not Doctor Street, which was very minute that nobody cared “whether its dead were white or black” (Morrison 123).

In Danville, Pennsylvania, Jake managed to own his own property and live a bountiful life. He called his farm “Lincoln’s Heaven”, his horse “President Lincoln”, his cow “Ulysses S. Grant” and his hog “General Lee”, expressing his gratitude for the white (Morrison 52). After witnessing his father’s death with the white murderers scot-free, Macon began to realize that the white was the dominate, learnt to drag out an ignoble existence, and constructed strong class consciousness in the white-

dominant society. Macon broke off with Pilate, because he feared that the white bank employees who "helped him buy and mortgage houses" would find his sister ran an inglorious wine house, wore ragged clothes, lived in the poor Southside and both she and her daughter gave birth to a child without a husband (Morrison 121). To marry his daughters to upper-class husband, Lena Dead and First Corinthians Dead were forbidden to mix with black males, particularly poor ones.

Brought up in his family's strong class consciousness, Milkman regarded the white as more honorable. Milkman revered President Roosevelt instead of his father or some other blacks. When he had an illusion that one of his legs was shorter than the other, he even felt happy because the deformity connected him to President Roosevelt. Besides, when Milkman began to take marriage into account, the girls on Honoré Island (where was full of beach houses) came to his mind at first thought, especially the redhead with light skin. Hagar, Milkman's niece, was never on the list of the women he was going to marry, though they had been lovers for about 14 years.

4. ALIENATION FROM FAMILY HISTORY

According to Stuart Hall, cultural identity is established "with a shared history and ancestry held in common", reflecting "the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes" (Hall 222). History is where cultural identity comes from. In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman's grandparents' and father's concealing of family history and the loss of family name leads to his alienation from family history and sense of rootlessness.

When freedom came in 1869, Milkman's paternal grandfather, Jake Solomon, lied to a white registrar in the Freedom Bureau that he was from Macon, his father was dead and he was free, and then escaped from his hometown, Shalimar, Virginia, to Danville, Pennsylvania, trying to break up with his past as a slave and pursue a bright future. However, the registrar was drunk and filled Jake's information in the wrong spaces. Finally, Jake Solomon became Macon Dead from Dunfrie. At the suggestion of his wife and his own will, Jake accepted the mistaken name to wipe out his past. After settling down in Danville, Jake had seldom told others about his past, including his son and daughter. He even lied to everyone in Danville that he and his wife met each other on a wagon going North to the "promised land" (Morrison 243). His wife's name, Singing Bird, was forbidden to be said after she was dead. Several years later, after Jake was shot to death, Macon Dead II and his sister Pilate Dead left their hometown at a young age, with little knowledge of their family history. As a matter of fact, in the early days of Macon's marriage, he frequently talked to his wife, Ruth, about Lincoln's Heaven, a farm owned by Jake. However, this farm

is nothing to Ruth and his father in law, Dr. Foster who looked down upon his business in the Southside. Meanwhile, Macon was gradually assimilated to the white culture in his pursuit of success. Little by little, Macon did not talk of anything about the farm for years and later he even did not reminisce much about it. Therefore, Milkman had learnt little about his family history during his childhood and early adulthood.

In addition, according to Toni Morrison, "If you come from Africa, your name is gone. It is particularly problematic because it is not just your name but your family, your tribe. When you die, how can you connect with your ancestors if you have lost your name? That's a huge psychological scar" (LeClair 126). Jake Solomon's discarding of his family name is his breakup with his family history. His acceptance of "Dead" as the family name not only wipes out their past and cuts off the connection with his family members, but also means the rupture with his family history and tradition.

Family history is of crucial importance in constructing cultural identity through tracing ancestral connection and cultural belonging. Because of his alienation from family history and loss of family name, Milkman did not know where he comes from and who he was, which plays a vital role in the loss of Milkman's cultural identity.

5. CONCLUSION

In the white dominant society, the white culture put the black culture on an inferior position by virtue of its political and economic advantage. Milkman was the victim of the collision of different cultures, especially the dominance of white culture. Toni Morrison reveals Milkman's suffering and loss of cultural identity in the white dominant society. The control from the white government, the loss of black culture and the alienation from family history leave the spirit of blacks no place to rest. Only by attaching importance to the black culture, can the African-Americans construct a full cultural identity.

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