

## On Feminism in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*

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### Abstract

Although the protagonist of *Song of Solomon* is a black man, the black women in the novel should not be ignored because they play significant roles in the growing of the hero Milkman. It is safe to say that *Song of Solomon* is abundant in feminism, which is one of the themes Morrison intends to present in her novels. This article aims to exploring the feminist thinking in the novel *Song of Solomon*. In this novel, Morrison presents her feminist views by describing some typical female images, and implies that black women should challenge the dominant white culture and patriarchal society and should be independent, strong and with sense of self.

**Key words:** *Song of Solomon*; Pilate; Milkman; Feminism

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### INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison is a distinguished contemporary African-American writer, who, as a black woman, describes physical and mental trauma suffered by black people under racial discrimination and creates a variety of black

images in her novels. *Song of Solomon* is the third novel written by Morrison, and receives much attention due to its rich connotations. The novel depicts the journey of the protagonist Milkman's search for roots and presents his growth during the journey. Many scholars and critics have made a great deal of research on this novel from different perspectives, such as growing of the black hero, seeking of black identity, re-establishing of African-American culture, as well as the narrative techniques and linguistic features there. Although the protagonist of the novel is a black man, the black women in the novel should not be ignored because they play significant roles in the growing of the hero Milkman, and they reflect Morrison's concern for black women, as Morrison always does in her other novels. It is safe to say that *Song of Solomon* is abundant in feminism, which is one of the themes Morrison intends to present in her novels, thus, this article aims to exploring the feminist thinking in the novel *Song of Solomon*.

### 1. BLACK WOMEN UNDER DUAL OPPRESSION

In the dominant white culture, black people suffer racial oppression all the time, and Morrison presents black people's miserable life and subordinate status in the white society in her novels, just as Davis puts it, "All of Morrison's characters exist in a world defined by its blackness and by the surrounding white society that both violates and denies it." (Davis, p.323) Black women are in a worse situation under the dual oppression from both race and gender in the dominant white culture and patriarchal society, which is embodied in *Song of Solomon*.

In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman's mother Ruth and his two sisters First Corinthians and Lena are representatives of the imprisoned black women. Ruth, as a middle-class black woman, is oppressed by both her father's and her husband's power. Before marriage, Ruth is under the sway

of her dictatorial doctor father. After marriage, Ruth falls from her father's grasp into her husband's cage and is subjected to the tyranny of her husband Macon. Macon possesses her, then possesses her father's wealth through marriage, as Macon says to his son Milkman, "Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too." (Morrison, p.61) Corinthians and Lena, Ruth's two daughters, who spend most of their lives making handmade red velvet roses at home, have been under the patriarchal power of their father Macon and their younger brother Milkman. The two sisters are taken as private property by their father and are despised by their brother. The misfortunes of Ruth and her two daughters are a vivid microcosm of the plight of imprisoned black women.

Milkman's lover Hagar, another victim of the dominant white culture and patriarchal society in the novel, is a typical woman without any sense of self. Hagar takes it for granted that Milkman should marry her, claiming that "he (Milkman) is my home in this world" (Morrison, p.154), because they are lovers for fourteen years, even though Hagar is Milkman's niece. But Milkman doesn't want to marry her and decides to break up with her. Being abandoned by Milkman, Hagar behaves crazily. In order to save love, Hagar tries to make herself beautiful. She believes that she loses Milkman's love because she is not as beautiful as the white females, thus she hates her blackness and succumbs to the dominant white culture. She makes up like white females by means of clothing, hair style and so on, and falls into blind and fanatical pursuit of white beauty. However, all she has done is not helpful, and she dies tragically. Hagar is doomed to her tragedy because she is subordinate to a man and surrenders herself to the dominant white culture. She loses herself in a blind pursuit of love and beauty. Hagar's tragedy exemplifies the fate of most of the black women, who have been enslaved by the dominant white culture and patriarchal society, trapped and unable to extricate themselves, thus lose their true selves.

Milkman's aunt Pilate, though taken as a black woman with sense of self in the novel, does not escape the oppression from the dominant white culture and patriarchal society. She is segregated from the dominant white society because of her poverty and blackness, and she is even despised by her own elder brother Macon. Although Macon seldom contact his poor, shabby and dark-skinned sister, living in the same city, he examines his sister from a male-centered perspective. Macon feels shamed with such a sister, who looks indecent and ugly. He thinks that it is abnormal for a family to be maintained without a man, and looks down on Pilate's means of earning a living. Macon later suspects that Pilate takes all the gold with her and lives on the gold, because a woman is economically dependent in his eyes. Pilate and her family live happily in a way they enjoy, and she is a

woman with contentment and true self. However, Macon belittles Pilate and her family from a male-centered angle.

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## 2. AWAKENING OF BLACK WOMEN

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In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison not only describes the entanglement of black men and black women, but also presents the growth of both black men and black women, and the growth of black men cannot be separated from the growth of black women. The novel provides some images of women who are at first victims of the oppression from and then fighters against the dominant white culture and patriarchal society, thus experience a process from obedience to independence.

In this novel, Corinthians and Lena have been under the oppression of their father Macon and their younger brother Milkman, until one day, forty-two-year-old Corinthians decides to free herself from the boring life and the patriarchal power of the family. She steps out of the house and finds a job as a maid, and she falls in love with a poor black man. When Milkman discovers Corinthians's love affair and tells on her to his father, Lena bravely denounces Milkman's indifference and indignity to them and pours out the miseries patriarchy imposes on them, and claims that her dignity would not be trampled on any more. Corinthians challenges the patriarchal power further and marries the poor black man despite her father's disagreement, thus at last earns her own love and happiness. The growth of black women is an important theme Morrison always refers to in her novels.

In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman, the protagonist of the novel, matures with the help of the women around him. Ruth gives birth to Milkman in order to restore the love of her husband, but in vain, so she pours all her love into her only son Milkman, another male in the Dead family, and has been breastfeeding her son until he is far beyond the age of sucking the breast. Among the care-givers are Milkman's two miserable sisters, who have sacrificed their best teenage years to care for him. Hagar devotes all her love to Milkman. These women all dedicate their selfless love to Milkman.

Milkman's father Macon is deeply influenced by the bourgeois ideology, and makes the money by all means. He even instills his theory of acquiring wealth into his son. The bourgeois ideology corrupts Milkman and turns him into a indifferent, selfish playboy. His friend, Guitar, is a member of the terrorist group which take revenge on the whites to extremes. The blind pursuit of wealth and the wrong guidance on race issues are not conducive to Milkman's mental growth. Milkman loses his way and even has great doubts about the meaning of life. It is women who act as spiritual mentors when Milkman is lost in his way of growing. The kindness and love of women play an important role in Milkman's several

important stages of spiritual transformation. Milkman is born in middle-class well-off family in the North. He does not need to work to support himself, and he is a selfish playboy who is not concerned with his father, mother and two elder sisters. He feels alienated from his own parents, and he is not close to his own sisters, on the contrary, he always degrades them. What's worse, Milkman almost ruins his sister Corinthians's happiness, which thoroughly irritates Lena. Lena's denunciation has some effect on Milkman to a certain extent, because Milkman decides to seek independence, even though he means to search for the gold in the south on his own. It is old Circe who leads Milkman to discover the lost legend of the Dead family as he searches for the gold in the south. There he touches the earth and the people where his ancestors once lived with, and for the first time in his life, Milkman feels the link between him and the south and matters the black culture which he is totally unfamiliar with before his journey in the south because of geographical distance and long-time alienation. Therefore, he changes his original search for the legendary gold into the search for the history of his ancestors.

It is obvious that the figure, who plays the most influential role in the journey of Milkman's growing, is his aunt Pilate. Pilate is the exemplification of black traditional culture. She saves Milkman before he is born, or he would be killed by his father. And in order to protect Milkman, Pilate decides to settle in the North city she does not belong to. Pilate's kindness and love and her family's warmth provide Milkman a sense of belonging. Under the subtle influence of Pilate, Milkman gradually inclines to Pilate's belief, distances himself from his father's materialistic values, frees himself from the fetters of the gold, has empathy with the history and culture of black people, and understands what love really means.

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### 3. PILATE AS AN IDEAL FEMINIST REPRESENTATIVE

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In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison creates a unique black woman Pilate. She is independent, confident and strong, thus is seen as a representative of the new black women.

The name "Pilate" is selected by her illiterate father in the Bible, because it "looked like a tree hanging in some princely but protective way over a row of smaller trees"(Morrison, p.19). Pilate always tries to protect the next generation like big trees. When her daughter Reba is bullied by a man, Pilate stands up to help her get out of trouble; when her granddaughter Hagar feels heartbroken for loss of love, she does her utmost to console her; when Milkman and Guitar are detained in the police, Pilate tries to flatter the white policemen so that they can be released from the police, though they sneak into her house late at night to steal the legendary gold. With her tenderness and tolerance, Reba and Hagar live happily and Milkman

tastes warmth which would not be felt in the Dead family. Trees are also a symbol of the strong bond between Pilate and the traditional black culture. In African culture, trees are the symbol of life. "Because trees are rooted in the land but their branches are right to heaven, trees are creatures belonging to two worlds, the medium between the top and the bottom. In many ancient civilizations, trees are generally regarded as the axis of the world, and the universe is based on them to form an orderly whole." (Cassirer, p.169) Looking back on her unique process of birth and upbringing, Pilate could be seen as the "daughter of nature" and the "mother of all things" (Wang, p.85). Milkman chooses to return to the mother and return to his ancestors, to plunge himself into the context of black culture, so as to restore the glory of black culture. Therefore, Milkman actually has two mothers in this novel, one is Ruth, the mother who gives birth to him, and the other is Pilate, the mother who acts as his spiritual mentor.

Pilate is the spiritual mentor of Milkman. Milkman, influenced by his father Macon, first despises his poor aunt. However, he likes to stay in the Pilate family because the natural warmth of the Pilate family is in sharp contrast to the coldness of the Dead family, and Milkman feels love and warmth from the three generations of the Pilate family. He is attracted by the Pilate family's laughter and songs, and curious about the life of the black people in the south where his ancestors once lived. Pilate's spiritual enlightenment to Milkman inspires his later journey to search for his family roots. Macon and Pilate, representing two totally different values, both play important roles in Milkman's life. Macon, Milkman's father, believes that happiness lies in the amount of wealth, and first incites Milkman to steal the gold out of Pilate's house, then encourages Milkman to set out to the south in search of the gold. Pilate, Milkman's aunt, values affection among people, not the wealth. Milkman eventually finds his way to ancestral history and traditional black culture that Pilate represents. Under the guidance of Pilate, Milkman finally gains spiritual rebirth.

Although *Song of Solomon* focuses on the growth of the protagonist Milkman, the growth of Pilate is also an important part Morrison pays close attention to. The novel describes how Pilate, who is discriminated against everywhere because of her physical defect and gradually marginalized by the society, grows into the cultural and spiritual leader, and acts as the spiritual mentor of Milkman. Without navel, Pilate encounters a lot of discrimination and rejection. At first, she keeps her physical defect as a secret, and would not let others find out her secret. But later she is relieved and does not mind others' strange look, and decides to be herself. When she suffers prejudice and ridicule, she does not waver in her faith in life and does what she wants to do. She turns into an independent woman with true self. Pilate not only

grows into a respected elder, but also guides Milkman to the way he is supposed to take. In this novel, Morrison generously endows Pilate with the qualities of the woman she most admires: independence, strength, love and a distinct sense of self. It is safe to say that Pilate is the ideal feminist image Morrison creates in her novels.

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## CONCLUSION

In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison presents her feminist views by describing some typical female images, and implies that black women should challenge the dominant white culture and patriarchal society and should be independent, strong and with sense of self. What's more, Morrison never considers black women and black men as conflicting forces, and she believes that the growth of black women would help black men grow. The mutual

understanding and communication between black women and black men will improve their relationship. And Morrison also believes that only by holding on their own traditions and culture can black people realize their value in the dominant white society.

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