

Milkman's Identity Crisis Caused by His Trauma in *Song of Solomon*

LUO Wanru^{[a],*}

^[a] Foreign Studies College, Hunan Normal University, Changsha, China.
* Corresponding author.

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Abstract

In the light of trauma theory, this thesis attempts to analyze Milkman's identity crisis in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*. It explores the cause of Milkman's identity crisis, that is, his own psychological trauma led by the effects of trans-generational transmission of familial and racial trauma. Losing parental love, Milkman is indifferent to others and always feels a sense of isolation and depression. Isolated by both the blacks and the whites, Milkman is trapped in identity crisis. He is internalized to the white identity and feels a sense of rootlessness. Through analyzing Milkman's identity crisis, this thesis tries to reveal the influences of slavery and racism on African Americans and probes into Toni Morrison's allusion to the issue of identity crisis facing minorities in America nowadays.

Key words: *Song of Solomon*; Trans-generational transmission of trauma; Identity crisis

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INTRODUCTION

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Toni Morrison's works reflect the historical trauma of African-American people from different aspects, and represent physical and psychological trauma of American blacks caused by slavery and racism. The psychological trauma is not eliminated as slavery was abolished, but becomes a haunting and painful memory of African

Americans. It still tortures the blacks after they were freed and also influences the fate of their next generations. In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison renders the protagonist Milkman undergoing the impact of his familial and racial trauma though he does not experience it himself directly.

Dominick LaCapra (2004) defines inter-generational transmission of trauma as "the way those not directly living through an event may nonetheless experience and manifest its posttraumatic symptoms, something especially prominent in the children or intimates of survivors or perpetrators who are possessed of and even by, the past and tend to relive what others have lived" (p.108). According to the theory, the impact of trauma can be transmitted trans-generationally, and a traumatic event that is experienced by one individual can be passed on so as to influence the offspring. The result is the decedents' re-experiencing of the traumatic symptoms. Even though Milkman himself does not experience those traumatic events, he manifests posttraumatic symptoms nonetheless and becomes a "surrogate victim" (LaCapra, 2004, p.77). The effects of trans-generational transmission of trauma lead to Milkman's own psychological trauma. He isolates himself from others and is indifferent to almost everything, even to the suffering of his family members. He feels lonely and thinks that life is boring and repressing. Finding no way out, he addicts himself to depression.

On both the individual and collective levels, trauma has an enormous influence on the development and sense of one's identity. As Neil J. Smelser (2004) says, trauma is "a threat to some part of their personal identity," and can "arouse negative affects" to the victims (p.40). All the obvious symptoms of trauma can bring about great impact on the self-esteem and self-perception of the individual. Therefore, that disrupts the formation of a relatively complete identity and leads to the individual's identity crisis.

From the cultural perspective, Stuart Hall (2005) defines identity "in terms of one, shared culture, a sort

of 'one true self,' hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed 'selves', which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common" (p.443-444). That is to say, identity means one's reflection of the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes in the community. However, trauma events "shatter the sense of connection between individual and community [...]" (Herman, 1992, p.54). And they violate the individual's self "that is formed and sustained in relationship to others" (Herman, 1992, p.51). As a result, that causes a distorted identity-formation, in which certain subject-positions may overwhelm those of the victim. Therefore, identity crisis confronts the victim.

1. TRANS-GENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF FAMILIAL AND RACIAL TRAUMA TO MILKMAN

Milkman lives in a family where the atmosphere seems to be strange and queer. Though five members in the family, they seldom speak to each other. His father and his mother seem to hate and be estranged from each other. Milkman's father, Macon Dead the Second, is unloving, greedy, and indifferent to anything except of money. His mother, Ruth Foster Dead, is a solitary and frail woman who is content to do some tiny things. They both suffer the painful loss of their beloved fathers. "In a natural disaster, witnessing the death of a family member is one of the events most likely to leave the survivor with an intractable, long-lasting traumatic syndrome" (Herman, 1992, p.53). As a result, the traumatic parental loss brings great impacts on their life. Their character is totally distorted and their optimistic attitude towards life changes into a negative one. That meanwhile influences the life and shapes the character of their only son, Milkman Dead.

"Descendants of victims may have a basis for coming empathically together to deal with events that divided their parent or ancestors, for they experience a psychic burden regarding events for which they are not responsible but for which they may none the less feel in some sense answerable" (LaCapra, 2004, p.6). Traumatic symptoms of both Ruth and Macon Dead the second etch into their psyches, and become their characters, which shape that of their son, Milkman Dead. Though Milkman himself does not experience those traumatic events, he feels "as though some burden [has] been given to him and that he [doesn't] deserve it" (Morrison, 1977, p.120). He has to suffer the same traumatic symptoms as his parents do.

The death of his father leads to Macon Dead the Second and Ruth's loss of parental love. Since they each experience traumatic parental loss, they have become numb and indifferent to their life, which results in Milkman's loss of parental love. Seldom does Milkman feel the care and love from his parents. When he was still a fetus, his father intended to kill him. After he grows

up, his father wants him to inherit his business and work for him. However, different from Macon the Second, Ruth thinks that Milkman "ought to consider going to medical school," so that he can become a doctor like his grandfather (Morrison, 1977, p.69). The motivation of their care for Milkman is their intention of recovering the glory of their beloved father in former days. As Milkman complains, "Everybody wants something from me [...]. Something they think they can't get anywhere else" (Morrison, 1977, p.222). Without love from his parents, Milkman is distorted mentally. As Herman (1992) describes:

Traumatized people feel utterly abandoned, utterly alone, cast out of the human and divine systems of care and protection that sustain life. Thereafter, a sense of alienation, of disconnection, pervades every relationship, from the most intimate familiar bonds to the most abstract affiliations of community and religion. (p.51)

Milkman has "never felt [...] he belonged to anyplace and anybody," and considers himself as "the outsider" in the place where he lives (Morrison, 1977, p.293). Most of his time, he would like to wander alone on the street aimlessly, as if he is a homeless wanderer. On the day knowing his parents' past from his father, Milkman walks alone on the street. "People [jostle] him trying to get past the solitary man standing in their way", because all of them are "going in the direction he [is] coming from" (Morrison, 1977, pp.77-78). A strong sense of alienation rushes at him. He feels as if the whole world abandons him and he is alone.

Being alone and feeling abandoned, Milkman isolates himself and is indifferent to almost everything. He has no friend, except of Guitar. Even though, he does not understand Guitar and often ignores his feelings. Milkman always thinks that Guitar would like to go with him to parties in Honore. However, in a discussion with Milkman, Guitar tells him almost in anger, "I never liked it! I went with you, but I never liked it. Never" (Morrison, 1977, p.103). Meanwhile, just as cold as his father, Milkman has never cared the feelings of his family, and has never thanked the sacrifices of his sisters who gave up their childhood to cater him. "Never [has] he thought of his mother as a person a separate individual, with a life apart from allowing or interfering with his own" (Morrison, 1977, p.75). As his elder sister Lena says of him, Milkman has been laughing at them all his life and does not know a single thing about them. Though he helps his mother beat his father, in Lena's eyes, Milkman is just "exactly like him [his father]" and is taking over what their father does to them and letting the females in the family know he has the right to tell them what to do (Morrison, 1977, p.215).

At the same time, Milkman usually renders himself addicting in depression and feels hopeless as if "[no] activity seemed worth the doing, no conversation worth having" (Morrison, 1977, p.90). Losing hope in his

life, Milkman fools around all day long. Sometimes, he concludes “if there was anyone in the world who liked him [...] for himself alone” (Morrison, 1977, p.79). And being deep in sadness, he even wishes to die when he realizes his life is just in a mess, so that he does not need to involve in the conflicts and problems he has to faces. Life for him is repressed, meaningless and bored. He wants to get rid of such a situation but finds no way out. Especially, when knowing his parents’ trauma story, he feels that he is like “a garbage pail for the actions and hatreds of other people” (Morrison, 1977, p.120). The parts that do not belong to his life but his parents’ become his own memory and fragmentally appear in his mind. He could experience the feelings of helplessness and pain as his parents when his parents witnessed their fathers’ death.

Finally, Milkman losses his self-hood in his feeling a sense of isolation and being indifferent and depressed. His imaginary deformity just confirms his loss of self. By the time Milkman is fourteen, he has noticed that “one of his legs [is] shorter than the other,” therefore, he has never stood straight (Morrison, 1977, p.62). In fact, “the deformity [is] mostly in his mind” (Morrison, 1977, p.62).

Not only does Milkman suffer from the effect of trans-generational transmission of familial trauma, but also he undergoes that of racial trauma. In *Song of Solomon*, to some extent, the past of the Dead family reflects the historical trauma of the black race in America caused by slavery and racism. African Americans’ painful history brings the descendants of its victims a series of psychological trauma, such as sense of repression, isolation, and inferiority. And the symptoms of racial trauma are transmitted generationally, too.

Though slavery was abolished more than a hundred years ago, it still haunts the generations of its victims and has become the origin of all kinds of problems confronting the African Americans nowadays. Indeed, slavery is a founding trauma for African Americans. For black slaves, their families are forcefully separated, their dignity is ruined, their bodies are mistreated, and their subjectivity is destroyed. During hundreds of years of slavery, black slaves were objectified and demeaned to the lowest. After the Emancipation, though slavery was abolished, racial discrimination has continued to be a reality that African Americans have to bear with, and they still do not share the equal rights and treatment with the white.

Haunted by the history of exploitation, oppression, and persecution, blacks still live in its aftermath. They feel they are isolated in the land where it claims that everyone is equal. Life in the country for them is so repressing that they try to get rid of the influence of their ancestors’ trauma. However, instead of finding a way out, they become depressed, and are numb to their life and to their great dreams they once held just as Macon Dead the Second and Guitar who dreamed of recovering the great dignity of their father. However, Macon almost forgets his original intention but becomes crazy for accumulating

wealth later; while Guitar addicts himself to violent and radical revenge on the whites.

Slavery and racial discrimination also lead to a sense of inferiority among African Americans on a deeper level. Self-inferiority impels them to give up the black tradition and forget their painful past, but to compromise with the white values. Finally, they put the white values above their own values. In *Song of Solomon*, represented by the Dead family, their great pride of living in whites’ way of life actually increases with their racial inferiority. The more pride they get in such life, the more inferiority they feel in their deep mind.

As an offspring of its victims, Milkman naturally cannot avoid bearing the same traumatic symptoms as his parents. The sense of inferiority, repression, and isolation would accompany him all the time as well. And he is unconscious of it.

2. MILKMAN’S IDENTITY CRISIS BY HIS TRAUMA

Although slavery has been abolished many years ago, its impact on the black people is permanent. And racism, still existing in the white dominant culture, continues to influence the life of African Americans. As a marginalized group, African-Americans have to bear the traumatic memory of slavery and racism. Though Milkman does not suffer those traumatic events by himself, he has to live under the impact of his ancestors’ trauma and sustain the traumatic symptoms passed on to him through his parents, thus he also has to face the identity crisis as his parents. Like his parents, taking an assimilation stance, Milkman has internalized a white identity as an idealized mode of self. However, being not accepted by the whites, he is also not welcomed by his black compatriots. So, he suffers a sense of rootlessness. Without finding a way out, Milkman loses his self or his identity. As he thinks of himself before his mirror, his whole body lacks “coherence, a coming together of the features into a total self” (Morrison, 1977, p.69). The traumatic symptoms of his patents are passed on to Milkman and contribute to his identity crisis.

2.1 INTERNALIZATION OF WHITE IDENTITY

Andrew Morrison says, “The African American people, often judged by white American society as inferior, have endured the stigma of being different since their history on this continent began. And this has led to the internalization if that judgment is admitted by the affected people” (Bouson, 2000, p.35). The history of slavery and the continued racism impels African Americans “either to take concentrated efforts to forget their painful past or to become fixated on their losses” (Kuo, 2007, p.64). The former group of the blacks are finally assimilated into the white culture; while the latter try to rebuild their dignity in a radical way and becomes radical separatist.

Represented by Guitar and the Seven Days, they addict themselves to the traumatic loss, self-pity and morbid lust

for revenge. Rather than sticking to the black heritages as they have hoped, in fact, they are going farther and farther away from it. For Guitar, "there are no innocent white people, because every one of them is a potential nigger-killer, if not an actual one" (Morrison, 1977, p.155). From a historical perspective, Guitar asserts, "[The whites] are unnatural [...]. The disease they have is in their blood, in the structure of their chromosomes" (Morrison, 1977, p.157). In Guitar's eyes, the white's racial discrimination to the blacks is innate and can not be changed.

Contrary to them, another group of the blacks, like Macon Dead the Second and Ruth, some middle class blacks, living with the white values, throw their black traditions away in their upward mobility. As a result, they are haunted by an overwhelming sense of alienation and insecurity and are uprooted from their black community. Actually, both Macon Dead the Second and Ruth take an assimilation stance. They know nothing about their ancestors' past and their hometown, except of their deep impressions of their own fathers. They have no memories of the past, of the painful history of slavery and racial oppression. Their loss of their fathers actually symbolizes their loss of African American past, loss of racial identity. They live in the values of whites and despise those of blacks. For Macon Dead the Second, he follows money and property-oriented ideology welcomed by the mainstream society and scorns his only sister Pilate's primitive way of life. Ruth is keen on artificial Western values symbolized by her table manners and actually feels uncomfortable at Pilate's house and her way of life.

Like his parents, Milkman, lives by the whites' values, too. He follows his father's money and property-oriented thought and, as his mother, is obsessed with a fine lifestyle welcomed by the white-dominated culture. Behaving like a white man and thinking like a white man, Milkman loses his black identity.

When he was a child, his father told him, "Own thing. Let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people, too" (Morrison, 1977, p.55). Therefore, when he was twelve years old, Milkman started to help his father to collect rents and accumulate property. On his journey to the South, he cares mostly about his material possessions: his large suitcase, two bottles of Cutty Sark, the gold Longines, beige three-piece suit, button-down light-blue shirt, beautiful Florsheim shoes, and so on.

Influenced by the values of his father that "Money is freedom" (Morrison, 1977, p.163), Milkman would like to solve things and seek for his own freedom with money. When he tries to end his loving affairs with Hagar because of feeling bored with her, Milkman just sends a letter to her with some money in as symbolic compensation. And for a bag of gold, he, together with Guitar, plans to steal Pilate's green bag, which they later find out it is a bag of bones. For the same goal, he goes to the South. Before his trip to the South, he has never thought that money is not all-powerful. Thus, when Milkman first comes to the

South which is not as prosperous and rich as the North, money becomes his northerner's difference from the local people, which Milkman is pleased with. Therefore, after asking whether he can check his bag in a small shop, Milkman quickly adds that "I'll pay" (Morrison, 1977, p.227). After seeing Circe lives a poor life, he once again asks naturally, "You need Money? How Much?" (Morrison, 1977, p.246). Still after accepting help from a strange driver, he thanks him by asking, "What do I owe you? For the Coke and all?" (Morrison, 1977, p.255) He does not know the important thing is not money there but the harmonious and natural relationship between each other, which both his father and he ignore. Naturally, Milkman is despised and hated by people there and later pays for what he does to them with blood not his money in Solomon's store.

Meanwhile, Milkman, as the local people in the South think, is as black as them but has "the heart of the white men" (Morrison, 1977, p.266). He lives in his white identity and sees his world from that perspective. Therefore, he can not understand why his friend Guitar is so radical to racial problems, and despises the local people at the beginning of his journey to the South.

Though he usually fools around with his buddy Guitar and hears of many tragic sufferings of the blacks, Milkman seldom shows his sympathy and concerns to them. Conversely, he sees those sufferings from the white perspective. Once he considers that "the racial problems that consumed Guitar were the most boring of all" (Morrison, 1977, p.107). He is not aware of racial discrimination as Guitar is because he subconsciously identifies himself as a white and lives by white values. Naturally, he can not understand the importance and meaning of racial problems and why Guitar is crazy about it.

Being in the south, Milkman sees the local people inferior to him and is ready at any moment to show his superiority to others. He calls them "them," and hasn't "bothered to say his name, nor ask theirs" (Morrison, 1977, p.266). When he speaks to them, Milkman always shows his contempt for their innocence and is impolite in his words. His manner and his clothes seem to be reminders that the local people have "no crops of their own and no land to speak of either" (Morrison, 1977, p.266). As soon as he gets out of his car in a place where there can not be more than two keys twenty-five miles around, he has locked his car to show his distrust of them.

Influenced by his parents, Milkman has been assimilated into white culture, and constructed a white identity, which is showed through his white-capitalist pursuit of materials and his white-identified position. Therefore, he is really a black man with a white heart.

2.2 SENSE OF ROOTLESSNESS

"Home, or place, is a fundamental aspect of identity" (Gaspar, 2004, p.103). Home is not only a geographical

location, but also “a symbolical site working through memory and desire,” “a mystical site of communal identity” (Rico, 2008, p.63). Since the first blacks from Africa were sold to America, the African Americans have virtually lost their home. The traumatic memories of slavery and racial discrimination have caused them to feel an acute sense of oppression in their native land. Though they were born in this land and know it intimately, they always feel repressed and alienated. A sense of rootlessness has haunted them from generation to generation. They try to get rid of it but feel helpless.

Milkman’s ancestor, Solomon, transported to America to be a slave, unable to bear any more the brutal oppression by his slave owner, leaves his wife and twenty-one children and flies back to his homeland Africa he has been yearning for. For him Africa is his homeland in real meaning so that he would give up everything, even his life, to seek for freedom in his homeland, not in the land he was born into. Macon Dead the first, the abandoned son of Solomon, escaping from the place that reminds him of the trauma of parental loss, comes to Danville from Shalimar with his wife and hopes to make a difference there. However, it is proved that he was wrong. The place is not the “Heaven” for a better life as he has expected, and he is cruelly murdered by the whites there. When it comes to Macon the second, like his father out of a same reason escaping from his trauma, he moves to Virginia, further north. After making great efforts, he becomes very rich with houses scattering here and there. However, for him, “they [do] not seem to belong to him at all--- in fact he [feels] as though the houses were in league with one another to make him feel like the outsider, the propertyless, landless wanderer” (Morrison, 1977, p.27). Though he struggles for his life for many years in Virginia, still he feels lonely and rootless there.

Like his father, Milkman is spiritually homeless, and always feels alienated, too. Never has he felt belonged to anyplace or anyone. “Milkman’s homelessness is partly due to his rootlessness” (Kuo, 2007, p.74). On the one hand, he is not accepted by the whites or the blacks; on the other hand, as a black, he knows no past of his family, or his race. He holds no name virtually, and inherits no black tradition. A sense of rootlessness haunts him.

Though he lives with a white identity, indeed, Milkman can not integrate into the white mainstream society. The fact that he communicates almost exclusively with his black friends well indicates that. At the same time, he is marginalized by the blacks, too. When he was in school,

[W]hite and black thought he was a riot and went out of their way to laugh at him and see to it that he had no lunch to eat, nor any crayons, nor ever got through the line to the toilet or the water foundation. [...] he was never asked to play those circle games, those singing games, to join in anything [...]. (Morrison, 1977, p.264)

After growing up, such a situation has never changed. Still, he has to suffer from isolation. When Guitar takes

Milkman to Feather’s pool hall, Feather just refuses to let him in. Guitar’s friends hate Milkman and his father for their white bourgeois values. At the beginning of his journey to the south, the local people actually look “with hatred at the city Negro,” and no one wants to speak to “the Negro with the Virginia license and the northern accent” (Morrison, 1977, p.266). Milkman is not welcomed by them because his conceit with superiority over them is intolerable. Wherever he goes, Milkman always plays the role of an “outsider,” and has to suffer the psychological displacement. Milkman’s sense of rootlessness actually originates from his loss of black identity: the loss of past, his name and black heritage.

For Milkman, he knows nothing about his family past and naturally is not interested in the past of blacks. Not until he is thirty, does he get some fragments about his parents’ past. However, “he just [wants] to beat a path away from his parents’ past, which [is] also their present and which [is] threatening his as well. He [hated] the acridness in his mother’s and father’s relationship [...]” (Morrison, 1977, p.180). He feels he should not deserve the burden and responsibility of what his parents bring to him. “Above all he [wants] to escape what he [knows], escape the implications of what he [has] been told” (Morrison, 1977, p.120). Unlike Pilate who maintains strong ties to her past and Guitar who embalms his traumatic past, Milkman considers the past of his family as “unwanted knowledge” to him (Morrison, 1977, p.120). As for the racial past, since his parents internalize in themselves the white identity and he himself does the same, Milkman has lost all related to his community.

What is worse, unlike Pilate who cherishes a deep love for her name, Milkman never cares much about and sometimes even dislikes his name, because people all call him “Milkman.” In fact, he, even his family, never has had a real family name since Macon Dead the first accepted his name mistakenly registered by that Yankee. Name is a connection between an individual and community. Losing their name, the Dead family lose their family heritage, and their identity. As the new family name suggests, the heritage is “dead” to them. As Philip Page (2005) writes, “without the name and the wisdom it implies, the Deads are ignorant of their ancestors and hence of themselves, and they are alienated from their community” (p.100).

As a result, there are almost no traditional and cultural elements of the blacks in Milkman’s life. He loses his connection with his community and also its traditional heritage. He can not sing folksongs like people in Pilate’s family, and has never paid any attention to the flying legends of Smith, though his birth was accompanied by it. Also, Milkman does not like or believe the supernatural occurrence, which is part of African religious tradition. For the blacks they believe that ghost is the soul of human body. It has its own world and holds the same desire as human beings. Pilate, who does not have a naval and holds that as a supernatural element, even still talks with

her father's soul. She is usually proud that her father will appear before her and tell her things. For Pilate, her father's soul is her mentor who instructs and comforts her when she is depressed. Milkman has never believed it. He even once laughs at Freddie when Freddie talks about the ghosts with him. Even he "couldn't stop the laughter, and the more he tried, the more it came" (Morrison, 1977, p.110).

Losing his past, his name, and his black heritage, Milkman loses the connection with his community and thus feels a strong sense of rootlessness and displacement. Meanwhile, he is hated by his black compatriots and not accepted by the whites, which sharpens this feeling. The symptoms of trans-generational transmission of racial trauma pass on to Milkman and lead to his psychological trauma, thus his identity crisis.

CONCLUSION

Since the blacks were brought and sold to America, they had lost connection with their native land and their contact with their ancestors' tradition and culture. They felt lonely like a wanderer. For a long time, African Americans have lived in the white-dominant society. To make a living, they have to adapt themselves to the white society and are gradually separated from their own traditions and cultures. Generally, because the blacks are at the bottom of society, they tend to hold a sense of national inferiority. For the modern African Americans, their history is a history of trauma. The history of slavery and racism bring them to live in the shadow of its traumatic aftermath. It brings the descendents of its victims into a series of trauma, including a sense of repression, isolation, and inferiority. They have to suffer from the negative influence of trans-generational transmission of racial trauma. As a result, some of them form a distorted identity.

The traumatic symptoms are passed on to Milkman and contribute to his identity crisis. On the one hand, Milkman has internalized a white identity as an idealized mode of self by accepting the money and property-oriented values and seeing his world from the white perspective. On the other hand, isolated by both the whites and his black compatriots, he feels a sense of rootlessness, which attributes to his loss of connection with his past and

black heritage. Without finding a way out, Milkman loses his self and also his identity. Actually, Milkman's problem in the novel is a reflection of the African Americans' in reality. In the white-dominated culture, they internalize themselves to the white identity, and meanwhile, feel they are marginalized.

However, what needs to be noted is that such an issue is not limited to the blacks at present, because the racial problem does not exist in the United States only between the whites and the blacks since the American population have become more diverse. It is between the whites and other minorities and even among all the races in the countries. Therefore, as racial discrimination continues, how to be out of identity crisis or construct identity is an issue that is worth pondering.

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