

Ulysses Theme in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon: A Thematic Study

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Abstract--- *This paper aims at discussing the Ulysses theme in Toni Morrison's novel Song of Solomon. Song of Solomon is a migratory narrative where Morrison shows her concern for people who migrated from the South to the North. It shows that the main problem these people face is that of their relationship with the past. Symbolically and literally they move away from their origins but a fruitful relationship can still be maintained with their past heritage only if the people themselves are willing. She presents the male adventure story from a woman's perspective. Morrison adds another dimension to this theme of Ulysses by concentrating equally on the suffering of his wife and son as well. Morrison as an Afro- American writer tries to focus on the cultural heritage of the people of African descent.*

Keywords--- *Toni Morrison, Song of Solomon, Ulysses, African American Literature.*

I. INTRODUCTION

One of the major differences between black men's work and black women's work is precisely the big scene of travelling Ulysses scene, for black men. They are moving. Trains-you hear those men talk about trains like they were their first lover- the names of the trains, the times of the trains... It is the Ulysses theme, the leaving home ... curiosity, what's around the corner ... what's down the track ... and in the process of finding, they are also making themselves.¹

Toni Morrison

Journeys undertaken to migrate for better opportunities and better society have always been a part of the human civilization. Spatial movement has been one of the human characters. These journeys were always associated with physical as well as spiritual emancipation. The basic need of human beings has always been to cross the limits imposed on them, and reach the new horizons- this tempted them to migrate. Migration, does not imply only physical movement, it also implies the journey undertaken by the mind, or in other words the psychological journey- which was the only available means for some to travel. A part from providing a new home, a new society and sometimes a new identity, migration has also made people realize that in their run towards power, freedom, and identity formation they have pulled themselves away from their roots and culture.

The central feature of American movement is also the experience of migration from the European old World to the New World, which was their promised land. The development, thirst for glory, religious independence and to many more. But whatever the motive may have been, it can easily be said that American history began with voyages of exploration or escape or migration. 1 this journey towards the west was a representative journey towards

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knowledge and freedom. For different people, who migrated to this land for different reasons, the migration represented different meanings.

Winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993, Toni Morrison explores a variety of themes while depicting the black experiences in America. She insists upon the responsibility that Afro- American writers have towards the past, and upon the necessity of “ripping the veil,” which has been drawn over certain facts of black experience. Her first two novels *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Sula* (1973) chart the growth of female protagonists towards womanhood. This struggle to attain womanhood, or black female identity is problematic, as their image of self is influenced by the dominant cultures ideology.

Song of Solomon is one of the immersion narratives in which Morrison aims at showing her concern for people who had migrated from place in to another. Her characters in her novels in general and in *Song of Solomon* in particular had migrated from one place into another resulted in an identity crisis due to their migration from one culture into another different one. Such incongruity of existence is reflected in her major characters in *Song of Solomon*.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Song of Solomon has been dealt with in many studies since it was published in 1977. Researchers have dealt with various aspects in the novel, by way or another, seem, superficially, similar to this I will discuss in this paper.

Researchers are interested in the protagonist Milkman’s search for identity through rejecting his father’s ‘white’, property based value system and through finding his family’s root. Milkman’s enslavement, however, is not physical or political, but private. Writers discuss his ruthlessness towards women. Some scholars claim that Milkman is being gradually feminized as he gains awareness of and respect for his family. In the final scene Milkman sings to his dying aunt, something he would never have dreamt of doing before in the past, traversing the memory of his, mostly, female teachers. Singing, some scholars say, together with a focus on domesticity and one’s community are inherently feminine, whereas hunting, which is represented at several stages in the novel, and the acquisition of property are masculine. If this is true, then Milkman is indeed being feminized.

Also some studies have tackled the symbols and metaphors. Naming is a recurring topic among scholars. The idea is that because of the institution of slavery, African Americans have been particularly concerned with knowing the correct name of people, places and things since these play an important role as links to a person’s history.

Moreover, *Song of Solomon* is a swarm with symbols of flight. Writers study the suicidal flight of Robert Smith, the mythical flight of Solomon back to Africa, the significance of airplanes, an eagle and a white peacock.

The symbolic value of bones as a connection to history is referred to by some scholars, if not extensively. Guitar, Milkman’s friend and member of a violent group of avenging murderers, has hated candy all his life. On the brink of attaining a new identity Milkman has for the first time in his life a loving relationship, characterized by reciprocity with a woman called Sweet. Thus, sweetness equals empathy and caring for family and community.

This lax treatment by scholars is partly a disappointment, but it also leaves a field of study open to new readers. I have so far given a survey to the themes which engage scholars on *Song of Solomon*.

III. DISCUSSION: ULYSSES THEME

Morrison's third novel *Song of Solomon* (1977) is basically an immersion narrative where main female character quest for history, identity and cultural heritage is focused upon the female character who undertook elaborate journey from one part of the country to the other. *Song of Solomon* is Morrison's first novel with a male protagonist. Harding and Martin believe that this novel "represents a reconsideration of the male adventure story, the Ulysses Theme, from a woman's perspective" (73). The Ulysses theme is related to the classical Greek epic poem "*Odyssey*" by Homer, which charts the wanderings of the Greek hero Odysseus from the Greek victory in Trojan war to his ultimate return to his home in Ithaca. This theme as treated by Morrison takes into consideration the wandering of the main characters to achieve something. Morrison adds another dimension to the theme by concentrating equally on the sufferings of his wife Penelope and son Telemachus. The novel begins with Robert Smith's attempt to fly away. This north Carolina Mutual life insurance agent promises to fly away from Mercy to the other side of lake superior: "At 3: 00 P.M. ON Wednesday the 18th of February, 1931, I will take off from Mercy and fly away on my own wings. Please forgive me I loved you all. Robert Smith." The opening of the novel suggests that Morrison is here using the myth of flying Africans. Gay Wilentz in the essay "If you surrender to the air: Folk legends of Flight and resistance in African American literature" writes about the myth of flying Africans and elaborates: "Flight, in this case function not merely as an individual or 'universal' symbol of transcendence, but as a collective symbol of resistance by a specific group within a socio-historical context" (21).

This flight also symbolizes return to Africa, which is a recurrent theme in the African diaspora.

Robert Smith's attempt to fly way coincides with Milkman's birth and Pilate's singing of the blues song filled with the imagery of flight.

Sugarman done fly away
Sugarman done gone
Sugarman cut across the sky
Sugarman gone home.... (*Song of Solomon* 6)

Robert Smith's bid to fly away is a failure as he tries to fly away using artificial blue wings. His failure saddens Milkman also and he loses all interests in life and himself: "to have to live without that single gift saddened him and left his imagination so bereft that he appeared dull" (*Song of Solomon* 9). Smith, it appears lacked the knowledge of the secret that the flying Americans had. His lack of knowledge also can be attributed to the fact that he has forgotten the historical knowledge of his community. He doesn't remember that the legendary flying Africans didn't require any artificial wings to return to their homeland.

Milkman, the son of Macon Dead II- one of the richest black man in Michigan comes to know about his father's history and childhood through different stories told to him by Macon and Pilate. The first story Pilate tells him is the story of her father Macon Dead I, who was killed by the whites, as he was a successful owner of land. Thus story is again told to him by Macon Dead II, who felt that his father was killed because he was a black man who owned land. This murder of Macon Dead I forces the flight of his orphaned children, and kills the spirit of black people who were left behind in Danville. Macon Dead II makes a journey of ascent and goes to the urban city in an effort to

escape the violence of his past, and to search for material comfort. The urban city environment changes him and the capitalist economy creates a desire in him to own more and more things. His marriage to Ruth Foster, the daughter of the “most respected negro” in the city, was also for material gains. He passes this secret mantra to his son and says “let me tell you right now the most important thing you’ll ever need to know: own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you’ll own yourself and other people too. Starting Monday, I’m going to teach you how” (*Song of Solomon* 55). Though he tries very hard to become an articulate survivor in the promised land, he fails as the people of his community hate him, and the dominant white Americans just value his money. He is alienated and isolated in the society as well as in his own family. His failure contrasts him with his father who was able to become an articulate survivor in the true sense of the word. Though both wanted to acquire land, their motives and their relationship with the land were different. People in Danville still remember Macon Dead I after many years of his death. He was an elder who always inspired and motivated them;

We live here. On this planet, in this nation, in this country right here.
nowhere else! we got a home in this rock, don’t you see! Nobody
starving in my home; nobody crying in my home and if I got
a home you got one too! Take it, hold it my brothers, shake it
squeeze it, turn it, twist it, beat it, kick it, kiss it, and pass it
on- can you hear me? Pass it on!” (*Song of Solomon* 235)

The message that the farm gave to the other black boys was not understood properly by Macon Dead II. He grabbed the land, owned it, bought it, sold it, but did not pass it on. Here passing on is very important, as in African culture, everything that an older knows in the family is passed on to the younger generation so that they could know about their community and family heritage. But, Macon Dead II just wanted to own things and therefore his wife and daughters starve and cry for love and attention. Farah Jasmine Griffin suggests that here the land and the ancestor are merged into one ‘protecting and wise figure’ (42). The sermon delivered by the farm (*Song of Solomon* 245) established the African American birth right of becoming the owners in the capitalist society. But, with the murder of Macon Dead I, this promise was also murdered. Metaphorically speaking it may also mean that the journey towards the promised land or Eden always ends with a failure. However, what they can have in abundance is “a broken heart. . . and folly. A whole lot of folly. You can count on it” (*Song of Solomon* 61). These views are representative of the views held by the majority of blacks, who were living in the urban cities. Susan L. Blake elaborates on this point and believes that though both father and son wanted to acquire land, the significance of their action was different. She further says:

Jake (Macon Dead I) achieved his success at the expense of the white folks,
so his success was a source of community pride for blacks. His son, Macon,
whom we see evading a widow with children and extorting rent from a man
threatening suicide, achieves his success at the expense of the black folks;
So his success testifies to his alienation from the black community. Jake’s
individualism served the community and Macon’s serves only himself
because the nature of the community has changed. (82)

Another major character who journeys a lot in the novel is Pilate. She is introduced as a singing woman “who had as much to do with his future as she had his past” (*Song of Solomon* 36). She is the only character in the urban Michigan, who was aware of her past, and had the potential of living on her own terms in Michigan. She is Macon Dead I’s daughter who goes further down the south in search of her roots. After their father’s death, Pilate and Macon Dead II separate from each other because of a rift between them about the acquisition of gold, which they find in a cave. Macon Dead kills the white man in the cave, and looking at the gold felt, “life safety, and luxury fanned out before him like the tailspread of a peacock” (*Song of Solomon* 170). He decides to take the gold and starts a new life with Pilate, but his sister considers it to be stealing and so they both fight over the gold which didn’t rightfully belong to them. It is at this juncture they take different paths- Macon Dead moves towards the North and Pilate moved towards Virginia- from where she believed her mother came. Like a true wanderer, she then travelled to many places, because she ‘loved the geography part’ (*Song of Solomon* 141). It was the geography book which made her want to read, and explore new places. On her way to Virginia, she joins a group of pickers, who were called migrants, and starts living with them. The importance of her travels to many places is that it made her more aware of the community to which she belonged, and her picking up of one rock from each place as a souvenir, brings to focus the importance that she bestows upon the past. This act of hers make the readers realize how every place that she visited was of equal importance to her. Pilate always wanted to keep moving and thus one day was able to reach Virginia. She felt elated, but it was very difficult for her to look for her people, as she didn’t know anything about them. But. The sense of living with other people who were like her made her happy: “there were more negroes there than she’d ever seen, and the comfort she felt in their midst she kept all her life” (*Song of Solomon* 146).

Although Virginia seemed to be Pilate’s last destination even it couldn’t contain her for long. From here she moved to an island off the coast of Virginia where a colony of Negro farmers lived. It was here in this island, that she became pregnant and gave birth to her daughter Reba, but she didn’t marry the man with whom she begot the child- as she was scared of being without a navel. This physical abnormality of hers, make her different from the other people. Navel, which is supposed to be the centre of human body, and a link between a child and the mother- was missing in her. Ironically, though she is without a navel, she is the centre of the novel who holds strings of the past together. Dorothy H. Lee emphasizes this feature and adds that her Pilate’s lack of the navel reinforces a sense of divinity in her- by making her a conjure woman.²

After twenty six years of travelling from place to place, she finally reaches Michigan, not in search of any Eden, but to live near her brother Macon Dead. She wanted her granddaughter Hagar to live in a place where she could be told about her other family members. Therefore, her journey towards the north is not an ascent in the true sense of the word, because she didn’t leave Virginia to run away from any enslavement rather she leaves the south in search of her family and familial ties. Michigan, as an urban centre, doesn’t interest her or motivate her to change her values and way of living. However, it was her presence in Michigan, that reminded Macon and Milkman of their African past. Though Pilate eschews the journey of ascent she sets an example for other black men and women living in Michigan. She shows how blacks could remain attached to their community values and live in the urban centres. Morrison points out, that it is here in Michigan, that Pilate realizes:

Although she was hampered by ignorance, but not in any way unintelligent, when she realized what her situation in the world was and would probably be she threw away every assumption she had learned and began at zero. First off, she cut her hair. That was one thing she didn't want to have to think about anymore. Then she tackled the problem of trying to decide how she wanted to live and what was valuable to her. When am I happy and when am I sad and what is the difference? What do I need to know to stay alive? What is true in the world? (*Song of Solomon* 149).

This acquisition and awareness of knowledge make her reject the traditional image of woman, and she becomes the teacher and guide of Milkman. It is through her song, that Milkman is able to perceive that he had ancestors who could actually fly. Susan Willis suggests that "Pilate is her brother's emotional and social antithesis" (318).

The most important journey that is undertaken in the novel is of Milkman, who goes towards the South in search of the lost gold. The second part of the novel deals with Milkman's journey, is an immersion narrative, at the end of which he becomes aware of his family history, and is also able to decipher the true meaning of Pilate's song. The most important is that he comes to know about his grandfather who flew away from slavery and went back to Africa. The myth of flying African, which is introduced at the beginning of the novel, comes to a full circle here, as Morrison tells us that there were actually some people who could fly back to their home. Milkman gains this knowledge when he decides to return back to the place where father came. Milkman at the end of his journey emerges victorious, because like Pilate now even he could sing the song of his ancestors. He is able to adapt the ancestor's song to fulfill the needs of his present existence. He comes forth as a true articulate kinsman; who feels connected to the people he meets on his journey. He feels as if he always belonged to this part of the world, and observes a close affinity with everything:

... he found himself exhilarated by simply walking the earth.
Walking it like he belonged on it; like his legs were stalks, tree
Trunks, a part of his body that extended down down down into
The rock and soil, and were comfortable there-on the earth
And on the place where he walked. (*Song of Solomon* 281).

It is this feeling of belonging to this particular place which makes him realize that it is the only safe place available to him.

Though metaphorically, Milkman's journey is a quest for his cultural identity this journey also makes him a wanderer who wanted to run out of his circumstances. This journey which was taken for attaining material wealth, changes into a quest for self, because a part from being an external journey, it also becomes an internal journey for him. Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems compare Milkman to other traditional heroes like Ulysses, Oedipus and Daedalus and believe that his journey can be compared to the rites of initiation, which are an integral part of the traditional African culture. Through these rites the 'initiant' learns the art of living in a community and values the traditions of the community.³

These symbolic rites are very necessary for Milkman as he also lives life according to the standards set by father Macon Dead II. He parties and dominates his sisters and his mother. His relationship with Hagar brings forward his non-commitment towards her. And like a true son of his father he believes that only money could bring him any freedom; this lust for money and freedom motivates him to leave Michigan in search of the lost gold. The song he hears in Shalimar gives him a clue to his own family's history:

Milkman's scalp began to tingle. Jay the only son of Solomon? Was
That Jake the only son of Solomon? Jake. He strained to hear the
Children. That was one of the people he was looking for. A man
named Jake who lived in Shalimar, as did his wife sing. (*Song of Solomon* 302).

The meaning of the song now becomes clear to him and clearly understands his family history. The story of Jake and Solomon becomes coherent and he comes to the conclusion that Solomon who was his great grandfather flew away to Africa and left behind twenty one sons, of which Jake was the one he tried to take along. This knowledge about his family makes Milkman feel proud of his ancestors as he says "he could fly! You hear me? My great granddaddy could fly!" (*Song of Solomon* 328). This journey of Milkman according to Dorothy H. Lee takes him from "spiritual death to rebirth, a direction symbolized by his discovery of the secret power of flight" (353). In this process of finding new places, and wealth he ultimately finds himself. He takes on this immersion journey because he rejects the ascent, and tries to reconstruct the value system. The other characters like Macon Dead, Ruth Dead and others suffer alienation and rejection because they fail to become articulate survivors.

Marilyn Sanders Mobley calls Toni Morrison a cultural archivist who through her literature tries to reclaim, remember, and rejuvenate the past experiences of the black community. Remembering of the past, according to Morrison, empowers her characters to survive in the present circumstances. Mobley further states that Morrison perceives this loss of cultural heritage "directly related to ideological, economic and political changes in American life and culture brought on by historical transition" (15).

In speaking of the legends of the flying Africans as heroic, Morrison in an interview states "the heroic is hidden in the lore. The archetypes have this sort of glory such as the triumph of this flying African. There is also the pity of the consequences of that heroism. So there is a mixture of terror and delight" (241). The pity of the consequences about which Morrison speaks comes into the focus in the epigraph of the novel, which is "for fathers may soar and the children may know their names." This epigraph brings the problematic side of Solomon's flight, which are the women and children who are left behind. The wife and the twenty one children of Solomon were the ones who kept alive the story of the flying away, or the story of his return to Africa. Wendy W. Walters focuses on this aspect saying :

Women and children persevere as unsung heroes, and male heroism is
more traditionally touted in oral legend. This seeming imbalance is
complicated by the fact that women and children, in Morrison's
reworking, are the ones who sing the praises. But, in this act of
singing, telling, remembering they are also questioning and critical.
They are the ones who remind Milkman about the people left behind by the
individualistic male heroic act. (19)

Therefore Morrison tells that important are the people who could fly, but equally important are those people who are left behind to tell their stories. This suggests that myths- which are part of our history should always be remembered and reinterpreted. Milkman reinterprets the myth of flying Africans by realizing the importance of flying without leaving the ground. His experiences make him a new man and now he learns “if you surrender to the air, you could ride it” (*Song of Solomon* 337). Surrendering becomes the keyword here, as even Guitar told him once that it is the vanity of the peacock which weighs it down and doesn’t allow it to fly away. This immersion narrative highlights the problem of people who are left behind (women and children), and the importance of giving up all the voices which could weigh the person down.

IV. CONCLUSION

According to what has been discussed earlier, we can conclude that what Morrison tries to achieve through her novel *Song of Solomon* is a reconciling congruity between the past and the present. This congruity could be achieved only when her characters would keep their ancient heritage, hence would live a happy life. Ancestors pass the qualities which are necessary for survival in the twentieth century. We also notice such an impressive amalgam between the past and the present. Morrison advocates such amalgam of this historical approach saying there is a necessity for its inculcation. After examining this novel we came to identify Morrison’s emphasis on the migration in terms of Ulysses theme. When people migrate and live in a new environment they should keep themselves in touch, spiritually, with the history, values and places left behind.

Notes

¹Toni Morrison, Interview with Robert B. Stepto, “Intimate Things in Place” Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present, eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and K.A. Appiah (New York: Amistad, 1993) 391.

²Dorothy H. Lee, “Song of Solomon: To Ride the Air,” *Black American Literature Forum* 16.2 (1982) 65.

³Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems, *Toni Morrison* (New York: Twayne Publisher, 1990) 65.

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