

# Spiritually Enslaving or Being Enslaved—On the Female Images in *Song of Solomon*

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**Abstract**—This paper aims at analyzing *Song of Solomon* written by Toni Morrison to show the author's Afro-American feminist tendency. *Song of Solomon* is a masterpiece that pays close attention to the fate of American black woman. The author mainly use Afro-American feminist criticism as a way to show her own thoughts and black people's song that Solomon wants to fly as the main rhyme to depict a free world for the female black, and analyses and combines the main female images in this novel with the theory closely.

**Index Terms**—*Song of Solomon*, Afro-American feminist criticism, spiritual freedom

## I. INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison, an American author, was born Chloe Anthony Wofford in Lorain, Ohio where her parents had moved to escape the problems of southern racism. While teaching at Howard University and caring for her two children, Morrison wrote her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970). In 1973, she finished *Sula*. The novel won the National Book Critics Award. After the success of *Song of Solomon*, in 1988 Morrison received the Pulitzer Prize for the novel *Beloved* (1987). She was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. In her work Toni Morrison has explored the experience and roles of black women in a racist and male dominated society. Morrison has been a member of both the National Council on the Arts and the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters.

With the publication of *Song of Solomon* (1977), Morrison gains an international attention. Written from a male point of view, the novel deals with Milkman Dead's efforts to recover his "ancient properties", a bag of gold. *Song of Solomon* explores the quest for cultural identity through an African American folktale about enslaved Africans who escape slavery by fleeing back to Africa. Here Morrison combines poetry, and songs to reveal the story of past generations that seem almost mystical. Though the leading character of the novel is a man, Milkman, but it is easy to see the key role the main female characters Pilate, Ruth and Hagar have played in the process of becoming mature and flying back to his black heritage.

During the recent years, with the extensive attention aroused by this novel in the whole world, many scholars have done a lot of researches on this novel from different perspectives for its increasing popularity in both China and foreign countries.

The most common one is "flight". As Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson Weems (1984) have written in their book *Toni Morrison*: "To Toni Morrison, the worst thing is not being irresponsible to others, but daring not to fly." Here they have overemphasized the victory that flight can bring to black people, not paid attention to the potential risk and tragedy in the flight. In China, Zhang Ying (2001) also discussed about "flight" in her paper *The Story of Flight in Song of Solomon*.(p.35-37) She mainly introduced how the black people fled back to seek for their root, especially in their mental changes about the future and past.

At the same time, magic realism has been widely used to analyze this novel. For example, Sun Ye (2005) has pointed out in his work *On the Magic Realistic Creating Skills in Toni Morrison's novels*: "She has used black folktales and names from Bible to make her works full of mystery flavor especially the names which have built the black images successfully and implied their personality and fate." In his paper *Magic Realism*, Chen Quan (1980) said: "Magic realism has been widely used to analyze the post-modern novels. There is no doubt that Morrison is a master for fully using this skill in *Song of Solomon*. She has given peculiar names to show the future of the images." (p.40-42)

But in this paper, Afro-American feminist criticism would be used as a starting point to analyze the typical female black images to show the subject implied in the work. In 1970, Toni Cade (2005) put forward Afro-American feminist criticism in her work *The Black Woman* for the first time. (Cade, p.278). It was Bell Hooks who showed the readers that Afro-American feminist criticism had grown up to maturity. In her work *Black Women and Feminism*, Hooks (1981) summarized the three main characteristics of Afro-American feminist criticism as fighting against three discriminations of race, sex and class. (p.175)

This paper aims at decomposing their personalities and finding out the reason for success or failure of their lives, and then reveals the theme that has been implied in the novel. We hope this thesis is helpful for readers to have a deeper understanding of this novel in the view of Afro-American feminist criticism.

## II. PILATE—A HERO PROTECTING BLACK HERITAGE

### A. *Against Racial Discrimination*

The first one that deeply influenced Milkman's life is Pilate, his aunt. The first time Milkman was guided to her house just by her song, then attracted by her lifestyle. Through black people's ancient stories and songs, Pilate makes her nephew understand the great wisdom of their race. They should keep their race identity, not abandon it in a modern white world. It is Pilate who transfers their African-American heritage to next generation like a pilot.

As a represent of the author, Pilate shows clearly that if the black people want to exist, except for having the independence of politics and economy, they also should keep their own heritage.

She was a mysterious person without navel when she was born. So people around her were not only afraid of her, but also hated her. When she was 12 years old, she saw a local white man killed her father and robbed their farm. But the hard life taught her how to live independently. She never surrendered to fate, but made a living for her daughter and granddaughter by her own labor. She would make fruit wine but not do the jobs that white people thought black people should do to get an easy life like serving in a white family or prostituting themselves.

Though her family is a female world because there is no man in this family, she has made it for creating a warm harbor for her daughter and granddaughter. There are no furniture, gas, electricity and running water in this family, but they can still enjoy a harmonious life. Most readers have been impressed by the scene that the whole family sang after supper in the candle light.

And she is not interested in material life. She looks down upon money, but when others have difficulties, she would give them her money earned by hard work. Although she is very poor, she still rejects the white's values about money. No poverty can be found in her eyes.

Morrison suggests that Pilate's supernatural powers, great strength, lasting youthfulness, and boundless love come from African-American cultural traditions. Although Pilate suffers the same disadvantages as Macon Jr., she is still able to preserve a link to her family's forgotten past. By singing folk songs about Sugarman's flight, Pilate recreates a past in which her ancestors shed the yoke of oppression.

The historic oral tradition of African-American folklore is one of the major characteristics of black art. It stems from a time when laws prohibited the teaching of slaves and oral communication between the slaves. As an important part of their culture, she never stops singing no matter she was happy or not. It is a direct way for her to show her inner feelings and her beautiful songs always make people taste the charming of black people, which was obviously different from the white.

### B. *Striving for Spiritual Freedom*

After Pilate and her brother goes to a mountain cave, she argues with her brother that they should not take the dead white man's gold away. She would be honest rather than steal others' privacy though she herself is very poor. It is the integrity unselfish help to others that can make her heart peaceful, not the material wealth. She prefers the spiritual freedom as a independent and helpful person than chasing material profit in crafty ways.

Later she determines to get rid of any material temptation in her heart for the peace in her heart. So when she cut off her hair, she comes to think about the problem: "Try to find out how to live? What has value for me? What should I know for live? What is real in the world?" (Morrison, 2001). Finally she finds the answer for herself and she knows she should live every day fully by ignoring material profit and helping others unselfishly. In her life, she laughs out loudly but never smiles. She thinks it is the right way to release the gloom and grief in her heart. It seems a little weird, but she forms a warm family for her children and uses the ancient songs to release her love for both life and her heritage.

Although in some white literary works the black women are depicted as being stupid as a puppet without own ideas and can do nothing but obeying the white people in order to make a fly's-head profit, Pilate, created by Morrison, is full of independence in her mind. She is sure that she is tall and strong and she can protect herself, so she dresses herself up like a man. She cut hair short, wears man shoes and never cries since she was 12 years old. She doesn't live on any man or illegal material wealth to support her daughter and granddaughter.

The most different thing from the negative black figures is that Pilate loves her family and community heart fully. She is always helping others and getting ready to help others at any time. The last words before she died are: "I wish I would know more people. I will give them my love. If I know more, I would love more." (Morrison, 1999). All her life, Pilate gives her unselfish love to the other black and makes a huge contribution to the unity and stability of black community. She has set a positive example to the other black women who have lost themselves in the white's value system and sexual discrimination. She tells the others they can show their values by being independent and helpful. Only by this way can they get spiritual freedom first.

### C. *Fighting against Class Discrimination*

When Pilate breaks up with her brother Macon Dead for the gold, her brother never talks to her. She uses her labor to support her family and lives a poor but happy life. However, her brother has learnt all skills from white people to make money including marry a rich black girl although he doesn't love her. So when they meet again after many years, they belong to different classes. In Macon's eyes, she is dirty, weird and bad for making wine illegally. The first sentence she gets from her brother was: "Can't you just wear like a woman?" (Morrison, 2001). She knows clearly that her brother has become a hypocritical upper class man among the black and it is impossible to change him any more. But after she finds her nephew Milkman is changed by his father, she guides him to dig their black heritage successfully.

At first, in Milkman's eye, father's guide, mother's and girlfriend's love are actually a heavy burden for him. He is never grateful to their care and love for he thought that he should get it without giving first. He does not change his mind until he is attracted by his aunt's free life style and mysterious songs. With Pilate's help and influence, Milkman denies the values from his father that money is the only meaningful thing. It is easy to find out that Pilate makes her nephew get freedom from money and middle class values. Just like a pilot she helps Milkman fly back for their black history and civilization.

In Morrison's works, she is emphasizing the key role that black women have played in the development of history and culture. We can feel the power and charm of black women everywhere. Their braveness and determination to protect their own culture has given us very deep impression.

### III. RUTH—OPPRESSED BY BOTH HUSBAND AND SON

#### A. *Living in Husband's Mental Torment*

If Pilate is a shining image created by the author, we can say Ruth, Milkman's mother is just the opposite one. She is under sexual discrimination but never trying to break it.

She is born in a quite rich and fame-enjoyed family for her father is a respected doctor. But her husband marries her for money, not for love. Married as a teenager, Ruth stops having sex when she is in her early twenties, because her husband can't stand her. In fact, he goes out of his way to criticize her cooking, her storytelling, and her existence. She is the hostess of Dead family, but a timid one. When her husband talks to her, she can feel the hatred from his each word. He earns respect and affluent lifestyles by depending on the support of the black community, but he betrays his origin and finds a way to escape the painful realities of his spiritually dead life while maintaining his facades as prosperous community leaders. Every day she is scared by her husband's indifference from the beginning and ends up the day with confusion by his indignity. There is always a desperate smile on her face.

She spends the best time of her life in loneliness from 20 to 40, for her husband refuses to live with her. And she never tends to fight against it but stand it. Maybe she is the poorest woman in the world, without friends, love and care for her. Her husband marries her for money, and insults her by saying she has a monstrous relationship with her father also for money.

The description of herself as a "small" woman captures the essence of Ruth's character. "Stunned into silence" by her psychologically abusive husband, Ruth's growth has been stunted, like that of her "half-grown" daughters and the dying maple tree in the side yard. A complicated woman who seems to "know a lot and understand very little", Ruth clings to the memory of her dead father, Dr. Foster, whom she perceives as the only one who ever really cared about her well-being. She is so starved of affection that she will get up in the middle of the night and travel by bus and train nearly an hour and a half to get to her father's grave, just so that she can talk to him.

Although she does not need to work hard for living, the dependence on her husband's money makes her become a slave and lose control of her own life gradually. Her husband uses man's absolute power on wife and turns her into a toy for his son and him. He does not shout loudly, but uses his cold silence and words to torment her mentally. Her life is wasted in watching the golden fish dying everyday. She is aware that her life was just like the tulips growing without sunshine and water and withered in the end.

#### B. *Suffering from Son's Sexual Discrimination*

Surrounded by husband's indignity, Rose finds no way to keep on living. With Pilate's help, they two play a trick on Macon. At last she gets pregnant and gives birth to her son, Milkman. However, when she is oppressed by her husband, she gives all her love to her son. Ruth loves Milkman because he represents the last time someone makes love to her, and it is so hard for him to keep alive when in her womb which dues to Macon's insistence that she has to abort. Milkman is her only hope to live, so she doesn't stop nursed him until the boy is 12 years old. That is why her son gets the name "Milkman".

One time when her husband insults her terribly, Milkman helps her and beats Macon. But later Milkman confesses that he does this not for loving mother, but for regarding his mother as a helpless woman. In his mind, women should be gentle, weak and obeying man. In a family, there has been a model for women what they should do or not, even what they should wear and how to talk to man. Rose's husband is not the only master of her fate, but also of her son. She has made the habit to obey her husband and son.

She may love her son without any selfish ideas, but her son just thinks this kind of love is very cheap and easy to get. Her love becomes too heavy for him to bear. Finally her love become a heavy burden for her son and makes him want to run away. She wishes to be a good mother, but her love makes her son become selfish and live a boring life everyday. Milkman also treats his mother and two sisters as servants not family members without any respect.

In her son's opinion, women are weak and helpless. Without men's help and guide, women are unable to achieve anything. Ruth is aware of this point, but she had gets used to it and never tries to change his mind and shows her value as a woman and mother.

She, like many other Deads, is lost at sea, finding solace only in speaking to a dead man, pulled between the world of the living and the deceased. That just shows readers the problems of sexual discrimination which Aro-American aimed at to solve.

#### IV. HAGA—LOSING HER WAY IN SELF-COGNITION

##### A. *Loving without Spiritual Self-independence*

Hagar, known as Pilate's granddaughter, is also Milkman's girlfriend. At first, Milkman is attracted by her for being innocent and active. She never stops her hot love for Milkman since she was 17 years old until she dies. She is given everything she ever wants, so when Milkman, her cousin and lover of almost fourteen years, dumps her, she goes mad.

When her love become a burden and makes him hard to breathe, her boyfriend just wants to break up with her and leave her. She has a close relationship with Milkman for many years but she does not know his true feelings and his idea about their future. Milkman cares nothing about their future like their marriage. He just wants to enjoy free love and bear no responsibility. He needs the fresh love, not the results he should think about.

So when Milkman is determined to leave her, Hagar becomes desperate. She is confused and can not accept the fact that she is not loved by Milkman. The more she loves him, the more Milkman wants to run away. Hagar does not realize this even when she is dying. She thinks Milkman does not love her just because she doesn't have soft hair like silk, or her eyes are not blue, or her skin is not white like ivory. She tries to kill Milkman and even suicides to threaten him for many times, but each time she fails. Gradually, he gets sick and dies when she is only 36. Her blind love makes her lose both her mind and her way. When she gives up her independence for love, it is determined she would be abandoned by Milkman.

##### B. *Following the White Culture Blindly*

It is clear that the African immigrants have been deeply influenced by the white people and their culture. The black people are evaluating their words and actions by using the white's traditions as a model. They have lost their racial identity and proud for their own culture.

Hagar is a typical one who is under the influence of the white's aesthetic standard. She regards the white women's appearance features as the symbol of beauty. So when Milkman abandons her, she misunderstands that it is her "ugly" appearance that changed Milkman's heart. In modern society, resorting to their advantages in economy, politics and culture, the white people set white women's appearance features as a symbol of beauty, such as silk-soft hair, white skin or blue eyes. But when she realizes she would never be up to the standard, she becomes immersed in great misery and despair.

When she accepts the white's value system, Hagar refuses to admit the beauty of her own race while she loses self-confidence and proud; on the other hand, it is impossible to turn herself into the white features that she longs for so much. Her great efforts are determined to be in vain. As critic Mori says in his work *Morrison and Womanist Discourse* (Mori, 1999): "the white people mean to shut the door upon black people by setting up these standards which made the black women on the horns of a dilemma. They were broken away from their own race, but they can't fit into the white community." This is the dilemma Hagar is right in. She suffers in the misery and dies in confusion for not finding a way out.

#### V. CONCLUSION

Toni Morrison's famous novel *Song of Solomon* is a successful Afro-American feminist criticism work. The story is about a black man's search for his identity through a discovery of his family history. This paper aims at showing how the Afro-American feminist criticism is used in this novel by discussing about the three main female images she has created: Pilate, Rose and Hagar.

They are not the leading characters of the novel, but they play a significant role in revealing the social meaning of writing this novel. If there weren't these important female images, there would not be successful depiction of the hero Milkman. His story and even his life would become meaningless. Although they don't have the trip to look for the gold and the root of the Afro-American, they have never stopped searching for equality, freedom and love with harsh difficulty.

Pilate is respected for being the moral guide of this novel. Although the narrator rarely focuses on what Pilate feels or thinks, her presence is felt everywhere in the novel. It is more accurate to see her name as a homonym for "pilot." She is frequently leading someone who is in need of guidance, such as the skeleton of her dead father, or Milkman, during his spiritual journey. She represents the typical image of being independent, helpful and full of love which Morrison has always been devoted to create, for she has found a way out for those who are under race, sex and class discrimination.

It is easy to find that Ruth and Hagar do need for the help to get themselves out of the social discrimination and mental blocks in daily life. They just represent the black females who are struggling in a world full of discrimination for the colored people. They hate the unequal treatment in their life but they dare not to break it up, only being tortured to death. At the same time, the readers can study and understand this novel from a different view. They can live their life with happiness, equality as well as spiritual freedom and get inner peace at last.

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