

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ISSN

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print):2321-3108 (online)

THE INTERCONNECTEDNESS OF LITERATURE, HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY: A STUDY OF TONI MORRISON'S *SONG OF SOLOMON*

Dr. TIALILA

Assistant Professor, Department of English
Peren Government College, Peren, Nagaland
Email: tialila82@gmail.com



Article info

Article Received: 19/09/2022

Article Accepted: 18/10/2022

Published online:21/10/2022

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.10.4.41](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.10.4.41)

Abstract

Toni Morrison's fictional world is permeated with her intimate association with real landscapes. In *Song of Solomon* Morrison presents a family's history which invariably reflects the collective history of the African Americans. The sequence of the story follows Milkman's unwitting physical and spiritual journey to his ancestral home. Throughout the novel, Morrison presents geography as a manifestation of time, and posits that an awareness of the past is integral to each character in discovering their true identity. The novel is anchored in Milkman's physical journey from alienation and estrangement to his discovery of self and cultural identity. This paper attempts to present how Morrison creatively navigates Milkman's southern journey and clearly establishes the interconnectedness of literature, geography, the past and the eventual realization of self and identity.

Keywords: Toni Morrison, geography, history, African American, identity

Toni Morrison's fictional world is permeated with her intimate association with real landscapes. Lawrence Buell's seemingly obvious declaration that there never was an 'is' without a 'where' is fairly applicable for Morrison. In *Writing for an Endangered World* (2001), Buell states the reality of emplacement and argues that all things in some sense take place and are rooted in and conditioned by a concrete materiality of place and environment. Even overtly discursive forms like identity or culture engage meaningfully with the places of their formation, as well as the relationships, places that structure a sense of difference and that help to shape and facilitate the nature of social and material relations. Hence, the imperative to think geographically, to be attuned to the dynamics of

geography at work in social structures and relations is as important as thinking historically.

In *Song of Solomon* Morrison presents a family's history which invariably reflects the collective history of the African Americans. The sequence of the story follows Milkman's unwitting physical and spiritual journey to his ancestral home. Marc C. Conner points out that finding home is not a simple matter of geography as believed by Milkman. His communal identity must be earned. Hence, Milkman must endure his own painful journey through lonely wilderness in order to find his real identity and true self (60). Milkman's search for identity involves racial conflict, social transition and communal values, whereas he is required to prove to the people in his ancestral land that he is worthy

enough to be their kinsmen. Philip M. Royster notes that the development of Milkman's identity is depicted by a series of difficult trials and tribulations during which he discovers the historical roots of his family (419). He begins his journey towards a self-knowledge that will be earned through his realization of family relationships and his heritage. As Marilyn Sander Mobley argues *Song of Solomon* invites us to remember the expensive price of freedom and the struggle the descendants of enslaved Africans had to wage to obtain what racial identity once denied (212).

In the introduction to *Literature and Geography: The Writing of Space Through History*, Emmanuelle Peraldo states that "Time and space have always been intrinsically linked to fictional texts: they help define what is called "the setting" of a story. "When and where does it take place?" is one of the first questions the reader asks oneself when he starts reading a text (2016, 1). Mikhail Bakhtin called that "time-space" combination, a combination of *chromos* and *topos* in *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981). Space is now considered to be a central metaphor and *topos* in literature, and literary criticism has seized space as a new tool. Similarly, literature turns out to be an ideal field for geography, as Muriel Rosemberg suggests, when she says that "literature is the artistic form of an experimental geography" ("Pratiques" 268).

Peraldo maintains that, in the past two decades, the connection between literature and geography have been defended and Marc Brosseau goes to the extent of combining literature and geography through the expression 'romans-geographes' (geographical novels). At the same time, literary cartography, literary geography and geocriticism have their specificities (Westphal 2007 and Tally 2011). However, they all agree upon the omnipresence of space, place and mapping at the core of the analysis. Approaches like ecocriticism (Buell 2001 and Garrard 2004), geopoetics (White 1994), geography of literature (Moretti 2000), or narrative cartography have also taken note of 'space' (1-2). Significantly, the common point among all these approaches is the cross-fertilization of categories as different as geography, ecology, psychology, history and literature, their interactions,

and the way they work on the referential level and on the creative level (3).

Literature, along with geography, is considered to be perfectly valid to account for space. As stated by Ait Touati (2011), it is meant to be multi-disciplinary so as to provide plural and multifocal approaches that sometimes require us to leave the realm of literature to make a detour into geography or cartography in order to get a better understanding of literary processes and practices, in the way astronomers leave the Earth to see it better (13). This determination to gather multifarious contributions had been dictated by geocritical theory where Bertrand Westphal defines geocriticism as plural and multifocal. This leads to questions such as: (a) Is it legitimate to say that a literary text enables us to work on the object "space", which does not belong to geography only? (b) What does it bring to literary criticism to use geographical tools like cartography or geocritical concepts? (c) Can literary texts be sources for the geographer? (Peraldo 3).

In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman's search is grounded in the African-American past and present. Literally, Milkman journeys out from his middle-class home to larger circles in the northern city where he lives and then travels to the southern agrarian community where the Dead family's American past began. Initially, he sets out to seek gold, then to know his family's real name which he discovers and then, latter finds out the marvelous secret of his enslaved forebears who were the flying Africans and used flight to escape their bondage. Metaphorically, he travels from ignorance of origins, heritage, identity, and communal responsibility to knowledge and acceptance. He moves from selfish and materialistic dilettantism to an understanding of brotherhood and releases his personal ego. And through a universal mythic-pattern he is able to find a place in the whole as he journeys from spiritual death to rebirth, a direction symbolized by his discovery of the secret power of flight. Mythically, liberation and transcendence follow the discovery of self (Mari Evans, 353).

The desire to know one's true self dominates the action of the characters in the novel, and it is

through their actions that an interconnectivity between their past history, geography and identity is made apparent. Throughout the novel, Morrison presents geography as a manifestation of time, and posits that an awareness of the past is integral to each character in discovering their true identity. The novel is anchored in Milkman's physical journey from alienation and estrangement to his discovery of self and cultural identity. Through his southern journey, Morrison clearly establishes the links between geography and the past and the eventual realization of self and identity. She explores this connection by describing to the reader, the journey of the protagonist to his ancestral home in the South which enables him to gradually understand the land. To rediscover his past identity and genuinely understand himself Milkman must undertake a geographical and physical journey and surrender to nature and flight. In *Ride out the Wilderness* (1987), Melvin Dixon states that *Song of Solomon* is Morrison's carefully drawn map of ancestral landscape that reclaims and resurrects moribund (the family name is Dead) or hibernating personalities" (158).

As Milkman travels from his home in the urban North to increasingly remote, rural, and southern sites, his journey charts a specifically African American geography linked to the history of slavery in the south and later northward migration. It simultaneously celebrates redemptive intimacy and affinity with the natural environment: Milkman moves from "the city man's boredom with nature's repetition" to being "exhilarated by simply walking the earth," praying attention in order to "hear what ...it had to say" (*Song of Solomon* 219). "What we (blacks) have to do is to reintroduce ourselves to ourselves. We have to know the past so that we can use it for now" (Susan Willis 36).

Morrison suggests a connection of geography with time as well as with the past and identity. The novel's opening as well as the introduction of characters indicate a close interconnection between the past, identity and geography. The past is integral in defining one's identity and to discover this past, one needs a knowledge of geography which makes geography a manifestation of time and a means to

understand one's identity fully. Junquera observes Morrison's geographical leanings:

When the omniscient narrator points out the difference between Milkman's bourgeois mother, Ruth and his aunt Pilate by highlighting the geographical issue: one well read but ill traveled, while the other had only read a geography book but had travelled from one end of the country to another (Junquera 60).

The impact of geography on identity is further demonstrated through the site of residence. The Dead's house, situated on Not Doctor Street, deliberately bought by the first black doctor in town shows his attempt to be distanced from the Blood Bank and efface his black skin color which is a reminder of his heritage and past. The doctor's desire to efface his black identity is inherited by Macon Dead Jr. who marries the doctor's daughter Ruth with the intention of acquiring the large house to expand his material wealth. Macon's desire for prestige and wealth signifies his compromise with white aspiration and culture and emphasizes Morrison's concept that the Dead's geographic isolation from the Blood bank removes them from their past and their black identity.

The early references to the past are shrouded in negativity and are focused on Milkman's immediate family, especially his father who has totally rejected the past. The alienated, fabricated and isolated past of his immediate family is reflected in their geographic location in Detroit. One of the first comprehensive image of Milkman which helps to establish his identity comes during his family's weekly drive which had become an important ritual for Macon to show off his wealth, a way to satisfy his pride and be reminded that he was indeed a successful man was in truth a burden for the little boy. Morrison describes:

Pressed in the front seat between his parents, it was only by kneeling on the dove gray seat and looking out the back window that he could see anything but riding backward troubled him. He felt like a blind man flying without knowing where he was going or where he had been and he did not like the sight of trees or houses and children slipping into

the space the automobile had left behind (*Song of Solomon* 32).

Milkman becomes self-centered and indifferent and isolates himself from both his black and white peers and also feels inherently dissatisfied which strains his relationships with the other characters. His increasingly introspective and depressed state even distances him from his friend, Guitar and feels that he must find a way to liberate himself from his father's beliefs and domination. Motivated by his family's stories of gold hidden in a cave, he sets out, at first to acquire this wealth for himself. However, as his geographical journey continues which interestingly takes a reversed track to the historical routes of black migration, there is a drastic reversal in his attitude and effectively heralds his imminent discovery of the richest gold, that is, his real identity and finally a sense of self and belonging.

In his quest for identity as a black man in the 20th century United States, Milkman gradually tries to piece together the history of his ancestors and achieves his goal by journeying into his father and aunt Pilate's past. He begins his journey toward self-knowledge that will be earned through an understanding of family relationships and ancestral heritage. As Marilyn Sander Mobley argues:

Song of Solomon invites us to remember the expensive price of freedom and the struggle the descendants of enslaved Africans had to wage to obtain what racial identity once denied (122).

In an epic way, the novel traces the self-discovery of Macon Dead III (Milkman), as he travels through the geography of his family's past. His wanderings become a kind of cultural epic through which black people can recover their often-observed or lost history of migration and slavery. According to Junquera, Milkman's southern journey marks a "process of deculturalization," which revolves around "the gradual dispossession of his urban commodities" (68). Milkman begins his journey in the comfort of a modern aeroplane. Morrison depicts flight as a symbol of escape and in the early part of his journey, Milkman is escaping Detroit. However, as he moves deeper into the south, he is no longer escaping but is unconsciously

reconnecting with and grounding himself in his past and his origins.

Morrison symbolically changes Milkman's mode of travel. Milkman travels further south by bus, thus bringing him nearer to the ground where he can begin the gradual dispossession of his urban possessions. However, to make him appreciate the landscape of his new found world, Morrison's geography further downgrades Milkman to travelling on foot and car, which sometimes breaks down ensuring "a learning process to be able to 'read' the book of nature and the significance of places. This learning process starts in Danville where, "he begins to understand the links between place, people and heritage" (Junquera 67). Here time begins to warp and slow down as Milkman has to wait four days for his car to be fixed which is in contrast with the fast moving pace of city life, and this attributes another significant step towards his past.

The importance that Morrison places upon nature, oral history and geography is significantly highlighted when she compels Milkman to:

Earn his kinship by enduring the woods, the wilderness. Like the fugitive in slave narratives, he has to renew his covenant with nature to secure passage out of the wilderness that had invited him in. Only through this initiatory trial in the woods of Blue Ridge County will he encounter those figures of the landscape that will give definite meaning to the otherwise confusing names and places in the children's songs" (*Ride Out the Wilderness*167).

Through his journey, Morrison starts to reconnect the loose historical cords of the lost legacy of the Africans and ironically, although he begins his journey in search of his father's material legacy, he discovers instead his family's treasured legacy, his cultural identity, his genealogy and historical community embedded in the folklore of the flying Africans. He finds his spiritual heritage in the southern setting which is crucial to his family's history in Danville, Pennsylvania and Shalimar, Virginia. The extent of Morrison's geographical imagery enriches the acts of deliverance in her novels which encompasses the three predominant "landscapes of retreat and generation – the

wilderness, the underground and the mountaintop” (*Ride Out the Wilderness*166).

Morrison’s representation of geography shapes Milkman’s journey which moves from the North to the South. She alters the direction of cultural history away from simple chronology towards a single charged moment of multiple discoveries by emphasizing Milkman’s acknowledgement of cultural and familial geography. *Song of Solomon* takes us to landscapes reminiscent in slave songs and narratives and at the same time suggests the stages of self-realization that leads one out of the underground to the mountaintop. Milkman develops an effective connection with his ancestral land after he confronts wilderness and renews his covenant with nature. He nurtures himself through his endurance in the deep woods of Blue Ridge County and earns his kinship and by virtue of his new enlightened self, he can now nurture others who are lost and homeless. It is Milkman who leads Pilate, the pariah figure to Shalimar and brings her homelessness to an end as she “blended into the population like a stick of butter in a churn”(335). They ascend together to the higher ground of Solomon’s Leap, both to bury the bones and to meet their destined fates. Milkman arrives at the ancestral ground to become rooted in it, as deep as Pilate and her father’s bones, thereby establishing how:

Morrison counteracts with the myth of the flying Africans to show Milkman the reach and promise of the air, if he can ride it. Milkman becomes a true descendant of Jake, the only son of Solomon (*Ride Out the Wilderness* 166).

Danielle Russell in *Between the Angle and the Curve* (2006) states that, “Identity, whether it is individual or collective cannot be separated from setting. For both positive and negative consideration of character influence of the environment must be acknowledged. The diverse and seemingly unconnected physical terrains encountered in Morrison’s texts – prairie and plantation, countryside and cityscape, Southwest and Midwest, North and South suggests the tremendous richness of the American literary landscape” (Russell 27).

Hence, provocative and enduring mythic tales along with the geography of America enriches Morrison’s novels with an important element of narrative and she frequently incorporates the rural South, Midwestern towns, and Northeastern cities. Morrison’s personal landscapes of memory also provides fertile ground for her imaginative works which rightly justifies the fact that, “Memory itself is understood as geographical space” (Russell 33).

Russell further elaborates the “geography of memory” which refers to places of the past which occupy concrete and abstract space and simultaneously exist in landscapes captured in memory and in locations of the present. In Morrison’s fiction, past and present mingle in the mind and the senses where geography becomes an artistic element and space spans time and physical boundaries (33). The far-reaching connections of geography is clearly illustrated in *Song of Solomon*:

“Gimme the tea, Guitar. Just the tea. No geography.” “No geography?” What about some history in your tea? Or some socio-politico...No that’s still geography. Goddam, Milk, I do believe my whole life’s geography” (114).

Through *Guitar*, Morrison emphasizes the complex connection of geography with history, politics and all other social practices. And this points out that Morrison’s novels are strongly rooted in place, thereby the importance of physical environment in her fiction remain indisputable. They emphasize not only where the action takes place, but also has a considerable preoccupation with the very concept of geography. That is, we learn how towns are born, what histories their names reflect, the way the streets are arranged etc. Morrison imbues her writing with a direct awareness of place, often emphasizing influences of the American South even within the urban North. Overall, Morrison’s milieu embraces geography as a powerful influence both, literally and symbolically” (*The Toni Morrison Encyclopedia* 137). One of the most significant characteristics of Toni Morrison’s novels is her use of geography because her characters, plots and themes are intimately connected to the place where they

live or take place and this connection is deliberate as she clearly states in an interview:

When the locality is clear, fully realized, then it becomes universal. I know there was something I wanted to clear away in writing, so I used the geography of my childhood, the imagined characters based on bits and pieces of people, and that was a statement" (Charles Ruas, 291).

Therefore, the black characters search for their identity through frequent journeys which also vindicates the point that black identity is insecure and like diasporic identity, it is constantly 'moving and becoming' rather than 'fixed as being.' Milkman becomes increasingly aware of the black history which is full of oppression, racial structure and class consciousness. And it is only when he renews his spiritual and sacred covenant with the land and nature of his forbears that he achieves freedom and a sense of belonging. To be precise, Morrison's geographical consciousness combines geography with history, landscape, environment, nature, race and gender politics.

Works Cited

- Ait-Touati, Frederique. *Fictions of the Cosmos. Science and Literature in the Seventeenth Century*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2011. Print.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel." *The Dialogic Imagination*. Austin: Univ. Texas Press, 1981: 84-258. Print.
- Buell, Lawrence. *Writing for an Endangered World: Literature, Culture and Environment in the U.S. and Beyond*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2001. Print.
- Conner, Marc C. "From the Sublime to the Beautiful: The Aesthetic Progression of Toni Morrison." *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison: Speaking the Unspeakable*. Ed. Marc C. Conner. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2000. 49-76. Print.
- Dixon, Melvin. *Ride Out the Wilderness: Geography and Identity in Afro-American Literature*. Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 1987. Print.
- Evans, Mari. *Black Women Writers 1950-1980: A Critical Evaluation*. Garden City, N.Y: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1984. Print.
- Flys Junquera, Carmen. "Time as Geography in *Song of Solomon*." *REDEN* 6,1993: 59-76. Print.
- King, Lovalerie. "Geography." *The Toni Morrison Encyclopedia*. Ed. Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu, Westport: Greenwood, 2003:136-140. Print.
- Mobley, Marilyn Sander. "Myth as Usable Past: Affirmation of Community and Self in *Song of Solomon*." *Folk Roots and Mythic Wings in Sarah Orne Jewett and Toni Morrison*. Barton Rouge & London: Louisiana State UP, 1991:91-133. Print.
- Morrison, Toni. *Song of Solomon*. 1977. London: Vintage, 1998. Print.
- Peraldo, Emmanuelle. *Literature and Geography: The Writing of Space Through History*. New Castle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016. Print.
- Rosemberg, Muriel. "Pratiques citadines d'un heros de roman policier." *BAGF*, 2007: 261-273. Print.
- Royster, Philip M. "Milkman's Flying: The Scapegoat Transcended in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*." *CLA Journal* (June 1982): 419-40. Print.
- Ruas, Charles. *Conversations with American writers*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf,1985, 291. Print.
- Russell, Danielle. *Between the Angle and the Curve: Mapping Gender, Race, Space and Identity in Willa Cather and Toni Morrison*.UK: Routledge, 2006. Print.
- Westphal, Bertrand. *La Geocritique. Reel, fiction, espace*. Paris: Les Editions de Minuit. 2007. Print.
- Willis, Susan. "Eruptions of Funk: Historicizing Toni Morrison." *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Ed. New York: Routledge, 1990: 264. Print.