



DIASPORIC IDENTITY AND CULTURAL DEPRIVATION IN TONI MORRISON'S *SONG OF SOLOMON*

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ABSTRACT

Identity is a kind of self-realization coupled with mutual recognition. A rich personal sense of cultural history connecting one to places, people, values and a past that give life meaning and depth will help one formulate one's identity. Milk Man Dead, the principal character in Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon* is trying to do it. He is engaged in a search for his identity through discovery of his familial heritage and recognition of his human responsibility. Milkman who was completely insensitive to the plight of African people in the beginning gradually comes to have a high level of race consciousness consequent on his recognition of the fact that one can formulate identity only by bonding oneself with the ancestral roots. Diaspora experience leads to double consciousness and creates an awareness of cultural deprivation

Key Words: diaspora, identity ,culture, alienation, individualism

Toni Morrison is one of the leading Afro-American writers who addressed the position of the African Americans in the pre-slavery and post slavery periods. She was concerned with the way Black individuals and communities were expressive or silenced within a dominant culture which has been intolerant of the racial difference. She knew fully well that everything was not well with America. She was aware of the identity crisis faced by the Blacks in America. Therefore, she tried her best to defend her race, protest against racial discrimination and glorify her culture and tradition.

Identity is a kind of self-realization coupled with mutual recognition. American Blacks, down the centuries were destined to work for the welfare and well being of the White masters, but they were conscious of this dehumanizing condition which emphasised their nobodiness. They were even deprived of the meaning and purpose of life and were kept in a state of social isolation and

psychological alienation. "Identity", according to Wheelis,

is a coherent sense of self, it depends upon the awareness that one's endeavours and one's life make sense, that they are meaningful in the context in which life is lived. It depends also upon stable values, and upon the conviction, that one's action and values are harmoniously related. It is a sense of wholeness, of integration, of knowing what is right and what is wrong and being able to choose. (qtd.in Cayton 39)

A rich personal sense of cultural history connecting one to places, people, values and a past that give life meaning and depth will help one formulate one's identity. Milk Man Dead, the principal character in Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon* is trying to do it. He is engaged in a search for his identity through discovery of his familial heritage and recognition of his human responsibility.

One notices Milkman's low level of consciousness in regard to his people's race and class oppression. He appears to be doomed to a life of alienation from himself and from others because, like his parents, he adheres to excessively rigid, materialistic Western values.

Milkman's father, a self made man was orphaned and disinherited in his adolescence becomes the richest Black man in town. Milkman even boasted about his father's houses, cars, assets and speculations. He believes that money, property and keys are what is real in the world. His financial success, materialism and individualism have cost him much, that he lost his capacity for communication and emotion. He advises his son: "Come to my office; work a couple of hours there and learn what's real. Let me tell you right now that one 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.(*Song 53*)"

Milkman's father's concept of family and wealth is akin to that of the Western world. The degeneration of the Dead family and the destructiveness of Macon's rugged individualism symbolize the invalidity of American values. Morrison demonstrates the incompatibility of the received assumptions and the demands of life in black American communities.

His concept of identity is different. In his opinion future successes determine identity and justify one's action in the past and in the present. His futuristic vision of time and identity is seen in his failure to consider his past as part of himself. He even denies the importance of his relationship with his sister and of their shared past and does not allow himself to think about his past: "He had not said any of this for years. He had not reminisced much about it recently... For years he hadn't had that kind of time or interest"(51). He believes that the coherence and significance of his identity lie in his future and cares only about his relationship to his son.

Milkman's search for gold indicates the similarity between his father's vision of the world and his own. He thinks that leaving his home town, his past and his responsibilities will guarantee him a

sense of his own identity. He believes that gold will provide him with "clean-lined definite self", the first sense of identity he has ever known. There is also similarity between himself and his father in that he is not able to see himself and other African people as one having a common identity, a common history and a common struggle. He does not identify himself with the local community, nor is he aware of national events that affect African people. He is so isolated from his people that he is the last to know about the relationship between Henry Porter and his sister, First Corinthians; he is the last to know about the Seven Days, the terrorist group and he is the last to know about Emmet Till's murder. Once he is aware of these events, he shows concern only for that which affects him directly, the relationship between Henry Porter and First Corinthians. When informed about the cruel murder of fourteen year old Till, a murder which elicited the sympathy of both Europeans and Africans world wide Milkman replies: "Yeah, well, fuck Till. I'm the one in trouble"(219). This also shows the extent of his estrangement from his community.

But he finds key to his liberation in Danville and Shalimar all though it is not gold that will free him. In his ancestor's world, communal and mythical values prevail over individualism and materialism. When he is in Danville, Milkman learns that place is significant because it "makes the past real"(231). When he arrives in the South he wears a "beige three – piece suit, button down light–blue shirt and black string tie (and) beautiful Florsheim shoes"(227). But stripped of his three piece suit and dressed in worn hunting clothes he enters the woods outside Shalimar and immediately stumbles upon his uncharted self. For the first time he considers his behaviour in relation to the others: "Under the moon, on ground alone... the cocoon that was 'personality' – gave way....there was nothing here to help him - not his money, his car, his father's reputation, his suit or his shoes... His watch and his two hundred dollars would be of no help out here, where all a man had was what he was born with, or had learned to use. An endurance"(276-277). Reduced to the essentials for the first time in his life, Milkman begins to question his surroundings and as he listens, noise becomes language or "what

there was before language”(278). Milkman here comprehends a mythic dimension as he reaches back toward a time when humans and animals shared communication.

Milkman who was completely insensitive to the plight of African people in the beginning gradually comes to have a high level of race consciousness consequent on his recognition of the fact that one can formulate identity only by bonding oneself with the ancestral roots. This is exemplified by his reaction on the occasion when he learns of his grandfather’s murder. Milkman first learns of his grandfather’s murder from Pilate, but he hears these details at a time when his race consciousness was at its lowest level. He then heard it as any other news item. But when he hears it a second time from Reverend Cooper, he is angry and asks why the Danville Africans did not seek revenge: “And nobody did anything? Milkman wondered at his own anger. He hadn’t felt angry when he first heard about it. Why now”(45).

He is infuriated on this occasion because of his increased race consciousness and of his heightened awareness of himself in connection with other African people. This is manifested in his love for his people, even for Day, who comes to kill him.

But something had maimed him, scarred him like Reverend Cooper’s knot, like Saul’s missing teeth, and like his own father. He felt a sudden rush of love for them all and out there under the sweet gum tree, within sound of men tracking a bobcat, he thought he understood Guitar now. Really understood him.(278)

The Shalimar hunt also sharpened his race consciousness. During the hunt he learned the insignificance of money and status when placed side by side with a true communion with true African people. Therefore, he decides to bond with the African people. But he has to pass through many stages of evolution before he can fully identify himself with African people. In the first place, he has to strip himself of all that is associated with his old society. He has to leave behind a wad of money, an expensive watch, three piece coat, tie, hat, suitcase, shoes etc. He must then recognize the values of the new society. He must know that he cannot exploit

his people. He must also value humanism which is held in esteem more by the African masses than by the African pretty bourgeois. Circe, Fred and the Shalimar community are offended by Milkman’s capitalist behaviour:

They looked at his skin and saw it was as black as theirs, but they knew he had the heart of the white men who came to pick them up in the trucks when they needed anonymous, faceless, laborers.(48)

Despite the fact that he has passed through various stages of evolution one has to admit that he was not able to formulate an identity completely. He was caught between two worlds – one represented by his father Macon Dead and the other by his aunt Pilate. Milkman has gained the liberating knowledge but has failed to share it in order to create an environment free of oppression. His flight reflects his lack of responsibility to the African community. Morrison’s choice of names for the characters in the novel also suggests the identity confusion and cultural deprivation of the Americans.

Milkman who has passed through various phases of identity confusion is finally able to acquire a sense of identity by immersing himself in the extended past. He leaves behind the individualism and materialism his father represents. He embraces the world represented by Pilate, the *culture bearer*. Pilate has no concern with finding herself; she is herself. But Milkman has concern with finding himself, because he is not himself. He wants to be himself. His search for identity ends in a flight, which he thinks will enable him to achieve identity.

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