A Study of Racism in Toni Morrison's *The Song of Solomon*

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Abstract: Racism and sexism are inextricably enmeshed within each other. In the case of immigrants into the dominant white society, they are reduced to a subaltern position. This inferiorisation results in a diminished definition of identity for them. While they attempt to assimilate into the dominant cultural framework, they are denied a validated social identity because they are refused to be absorbed into the mainstream social structure. Thus one of their basic necessities becomes their need to establish their ethnic background which becomes a determining factor in creating and valorizing a separate distinct but equal identity with dominant whites. We find that in America, different ethnic groups like the Jewish-American, Afro-American, Asian-American, Cheroki etc., have to compete with the dominant white society for social equality.

Keywords: Racism, Feminism, Post-colonialism, Identity, Social Equality.

INTRODUCTION

Vevaina and Godard, in their essay "Crossings" in Intersexions say that what feminists from dominant groups fail to realize is that the fight against patriarchy is a lot of complex amongst oppressed groups and besides being subjected to racist stereotypes native and ethnic women are also subject to ethnically specified definitions of womanhood. Feminism has most often proved to be euro-centric and this was challenged by black feminists who have questioned the white women's moral right to speak for black women. The clarion call for the liberation of black women had come from Sojourner Truth, in 1852, who questioned the white tendency to reuse femininity to black females and also the patriarchal tendency to refuse equality with them. The black activist Anna Julia Cooper entreated the public to recognize the double sex role played by black women in the society-as spokesperson for their race and as advocates of rights of women. Most aboriginal and ethnic women writers attempt to retrieve their ethnic identity along with their feminine identity. Ethnicity and feminism can be coupled together when it comes to the question of positioning. In Kristevan terms, femininity is that which is marginalized by the patriarchal order. Toril Moi in her Sexual/textual Politics states that Kristeva's emphasis on marginality allows us to view the repression of the feminine in terms of positionality rather than of essences and what is perceived as marginal at any given time depends on the position one occupies. Similarly the term ethnicity also acquires relevance when we study a particular group's or community's relative position in a given society.

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Usually when a particular ethnic group within a larger community comes to occupy a marginalized position there is a plea to admit them into the dominant social framework even while maintaining their distinct ethnic identities. That is what we see in the case of Afro-Americans. They try to keep alive their ancestral tradition brought from their homeland, Africa. Within the dominant modes of social and power structures which try to erase their tradition and culture, they pass on their heritage through techniques of their own-the oral tradition, folk arts, folk culture, etc. they have developed their own indigenous cultural cults-a distinct Afro-American one. And their activism is not just the Afro-American community, but for their whole race. Thus racism also becomes a part of their ethnic tenets. Valerie Smith in her essay "Split affinities: the case of interracial rape" argues as follows within dominant discourses, race and gender are treated as if they are mutually exclusive categories of experience. In contrast, black feminism pursues the "intersectionality" of race and gender in the lives of black women, thereby rendering inapplicable to the lives of black women any "single axis" theory about racism or sexism. (272) Jane Freedman in Feminism, (2002) states that Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias point out that women are participants in ethnic and national processes in a number of specific ways: as biological reproducers of the ethnic community, as key actors in the transmission of the community's values as markers of ethnic or national distinctiveness, as active participants in national struggles.

The key aspect of American identity is the experience of migration. The immigrants and their descendants have made an important contribution to the making of American history. As Americans, they partake of a national identity, a communally determined and accepted sense of self and the same time as Americans and ethnicities they define themselves in terms of their ancestry. This inherent tension in American identity accounts for the richness and complexity of the American literature and culture. Werner Sollors has argued that as a tenuous
ancestry and the interplay of different ancestries, ethnicity may be regarded as the most crucial aspect of American national character.

The concept of ethnicity holds within it a wide range of social, national, tribal, religious, linguistic and cultural features. The possible definition of an ethnic group is a group that is socially distinct in terms of cultural or national characteristics. Ethnicity is sometimes identifiable with nationality though it cannot have a total identification with it. But the term acquires relevance when placed in relation to the nationality of a particular group which is located within a larger national group. Thus are the cases of Jewish Americans, Afro-Americans, Black-British etc. The concept of etnicity is relevant in the context colonization too, the most evident instance being the Africans whose culture has been destabilized by colonization.

In the context of migration, W. W. Isajaw describes an ethnic group as "a group or category of persons who have a common ancestral origin and the same cultural traits, who have a sense of peoplehood and group belonging, who of immigrant background and have either minority or majority status within a larger society" (118). Thus a study of ethnicity includes a number of traits like the immigrant groups common national or geographic origin, same culture or customs, race or physical characteristics, religion, language, customs and even cuisines. In a number of cases, the practical and social implications of a group's status have been influenced by the memories of a past, of a common national origin. Thus they remain inter-related by a sense of solidarity which arises from a recognition of a lineage that can be traced back to a homeland. Ethnicity is inherently a matter of ancestry, of beliefs about the origin of one's forebears. They share myths of common ancestry, historical memories and elements of common culture.

An essential feature of colonial domination is cultural colonization which results in the destabilization of a community's culture. But there cannot be a complete erasure of the culture. Thus it remains dormant within the tribal structure to be used later on as an edifice for future development. Black Americans are now redefining themselves on ethnic terms. Among blacks brought in as slaves, African ethnic traditions persisted as submerged fragments. Now they are trying to recreate an identity on the basis of cultural continuities rather than on the caste-racial criteria used in oppressing them-blacks in America are now seeking means of amplifying all the criteria comprising ethnicity. Territorial origins in Africa and territorial and economic strongholds in present American settings, old folk and religious practices, features of life style, family relationships and artistic traditions are being scrutinized for their Afro-American flavor.

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In order to understand American identity, it is necessary to look to factors of "otherness" such as gender and etnicity. A study of ethnic women writers can reveal the female version of the American "national character". Literature by and about those who are marginalized can best represent what happens within that literature. Thus literature produced by American ethnic women presents not only the female or ethnic experience in America, but the American culture itself which places blacks within a secondary or tertiary space. Paul Marshall, in the words of Harihar Kulkarni, "is an avant-garde black woman novelist who insists on the reality of black culture not only as an antidote to white racism but primarily as an inevitable property of a people who, many thought, had no history, or culture of their own" (195). Paul Marshall's women are social and political activists, at the same time being the transmitters of Afro-centric culture. The black women novelists' effort to deconstruct the existing image of black women and to inscribe a black feminine subject other than the discrete individual, has been done by an appropriation of black folk cultural forms. As a result of ethnocentrism in the culture, in 1960's, black folk culture was assigned an ideological value in order to suit nationalist intentions.

This assertion on oral forms had proved useful for black women's fiction. The black folk cultural forms were used to subvert the dominant white literate culture. The novel that emerged as a predominant genre in 1970's experimented with black oral forms as an attempt to liberate a uniquely black narrative voice. Folk story telling devices animate the narrative medium of Carlene Polite's Sister X and the Victims of Foul Play and Alice Walker's Meridian and the blues determines the narrative voice and structure of Gayl Jones's Corregidora. Thus we find that Afro-American writers use ethnic elements and techniques of story telling in their works as a device to retrieve and rejuvenate their heritage and culture, Folk arts and folk cultural forms are distinct aspects of ethnicity. Morrison' novels address the black people to see themselves within a culture. The title of the novel Jazz itself reveals Morrison' s affinity to black folk arts and Tar Baby is based on a black American folk tale wherein a white farmer tries to trap a mischievous rabbit with the help of a tar baby he makes for the purpose. But he is out-witted by the rabbit. It is in Song of Solomon that we find exemplary instance of ethnic elements being employed in literary venture, An analysis of the novel reveals this fact.

Morrison has created a whole autonomous world of blacks in Song of Solomon. The two major characters are symbolic of all blacks and are archetypal. They are typical representatives of black life-Milkman is symbolic of all blacks and his aunt, Pilate, is the archetype of all black women, the Great Mother. In the novel Morrison depicts how blacks take pride in being black and revels in their sense of historical heritage as the backbone of their culture.

The novel is an authentic assertive of Afro-centrism. Morrison's role as an Afro-centric storyteller is unmistakable and the orature of her foremothers as well as the oral traditions of the black community are evident both in the language and structure of the novel. In her works, Morrison more than often weaves into it
the Afro-American folktales, folksongs and legends. Song of Solomon is based on a story that she heard from her maternal grandparents and it is imbued with folk myths and legends from the African diaspora. The author draws on Afro-American legends about Africans who could fly and who used this marvelous and magical ability to escape from slavery in America. Stories about Africans who either flew or jumped off slave ships as well as those who saw the horrors of slavery when they landed in the America in their anguish sought to fly back to Africa are very popular among the Afro-Americans.

In Song of Solomon the main feature of Morrison's narration is her use of folklore, superstitions, children's games, songs, etc. The history spirits of the black culture are intensified in these old songs. Milkman's search for his ancestral roots finds meaning in such sources as the blues songs and especially in the Song of Solomon. He links himself with the past by unceasingly piercing it all together. Morrison recognizes that oral tradition or folklore can more directly convey the truth than relying on the analytical descriptions based on Western logic "and traditions. She wanted to utilize the black folklore, especially the magic and superstitious part of it, in her texts because black people believe in magic and it is part of their heritage. This, she says, is the reason for using flying as the central metaphor in Song of Solomon.

Throughout the novel Morrison questions the imposed values and perceptions of the dominant culture. As an alternative, Morrison tries to offer a cultural knowledge and belief situated in black America's African traditions and heritage. The song of Sugarman flying away to his home sung at the time of Milkman's birth is the key to Milkman's quest of his own roots. Moreover, it also highlights the function of the Afro-American women in passing on their legends to successive generations. Morrison's essay "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" explicates the relevance of past history and ancestral heritage in rebuilding the present of black culture. In her works she validates that past is something that cannot be erased from a black man's/woman's world. In the opening pages of Song of Solomon itself Morrison exemplifies it directly in the Sugarman's song sung by Pilate and a few pages later on, symbolically, through Ruth Dead, Milkman's mother: Ruth let the seaweed disintegrate, and later when its veins and stems dropped and curled into brown scabs on the table, she removed the bowl and brushed away the scabs. But the water mark, hidden by the bowl all these years, was exposed. And once exposed, it behaved as though it were itself a plant and flourished into a huge suede-gray flower that throbbed like fever, and singled like the shift of sand dunes.

This is metaphorical of the black cultural past which often lay hidden under the bowl of dominant culture. Once this submerged culture gains proper exposure it thrives and flowers and flourishes conjoining in the re-creation of a cultural present situated in the past. Thus the Dead do, though they are alienated from the black community because of the alien values they hold on to, cannot escape from the influence of their ancestral values and traditions. This is further explicated by the journey taken on by Macon Dead Jr. (Milkman) as he travels to Virginia in this quest for an ancestral identity, which in turn helps him to identify himself with the black community in which he lives.

Milkman's quest is undertaken initially to provide him access to gold which he believes Pilate, his aunt, has left behind. At the beginning, Milkman starts journey as an effort to gain freedom from obligation to others by taking possession of a familial treasure. But instead of gold what he comes across is a treasure more valuable than gold-a treasure rich with the history of his ancestors. He develops a mature sense of familial obligations and discovers an informed knowledge of familial and tribal history and a profound comprehension of tribal wisdom. His experience at Shalimar, Virginia, brings over a complete change in Milkman and he passes on to a real black sensibility which had remained obscured by tile Western sensibility that he had adopted from his father. He had always considered himself too good for others of his community. His perception receives a hard blow at Shalimar when the people around view him with hostility because he was an arrogant, urbanite Negro who looked down upon the black men and made them feel worthless: His manner, his clothes were reminders that they had no crops of their own and no land to speak of either. Just vegetable gardens, which the women took care of and chicken and pigs that the children took care of. He was telling them that they weren't men, that they relied on women and children for their food. He hadn't found them fit enough or good enough to want to know their names, and believed himself too good to tell them his. 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. (269)

Milkman expected, in vain, that in his hometown he would be loved and respected by all just because at Danville, where he came across his family history, he was the object of hero worship. But soon he finds that his sense of superiority over the people at Shalimar has earned him only contempt and abhorration: "In his hometown his name spelled dread and grudging respect. But here, in his 'home', he was unknown, unloved, and damn near killed. These were some of the unlung niggers in the world" (273). But during the course of an initiatory trial-by-fire in Shalimar in which black male elders invite the bourgeois urbanite on a hunting trek that is long and arduous, and then leaves him to fend for himself in the dark forest, a new knowledge of self and culture dawns on him. Left to himself in the dark forest filled with wild animals, Milkman tries to analyze the treatment he has received since his arrival, and also the ways he has mistreated others. He considers those people to be savages "Suspicious, Hot-tempered, Eager to find fault and despise any outsider, Touchy, Devious,
jealous, traitorous and evil. He had done nothing to receive their contempt" (279). But gradually Milkman recognizes the necessity of abandoning such immature perspectives.

It is the blues song sung by the children at Shalimar, while playing the Song of Solomon that brings about the total change in Milkman. It tosses his mind to an uncomfortable state. The feeling of hatred he nurtured until then towards his parents and sisters gradually dissolves. When he listened to the song carefully, it rings a bell in his ears. He discovers that the blues song the children were singing were about his own ancestors- his great grandfather, great grandmother, grandfather and grandmother. The song was about how Solomon, his great grandfather tried to fly back to Africa taking his son Jake along with him. But he dropped the boy in the course of his flying, near the porch of the house where Hedly, mother of Sing whom Jake later married, found him and brought him up.

Milkman could identify all the names figured in the song to be of his ancestors-Solomon called Shalimar by Hedly, Jake, Ryna who is Jake’s mother, and Hedly the foster mother of Jake. These names reminds him of a number of places like Solomon’s Leap, Ryna’s Gulch, the little village Shalimar, Not Doctor Street called so by Negroes in memory of his grandfather because he was the first colored man of consequence in that city. The knowledge of his tribal and ancestral history thrills him. He is excited over the discovery that his great grandfather, Solomon, was a flying African and he had flown back to Africa. This information that he belonged to this tribe of flying Africans fills him with a sense of pride. The self-alienated man who had left his hometown in search of gold, and in search of an identity discovers a whole history of his tribe, of his ancestors who had their roots in Africa. He develops a sense of community and also a strong black identity. He now discerns the significance of many of the actions of Pilate-the song of Sugarman often sung by her, collection of rocks from the places she had lived in and why Pilate hung her name as an earring. All these contribute to the re-creation of an identity with a black Afro-centric lineage in Milkman. Just as Shalimar surrendered to the air in order to ride it, Milkman too finally undertakes this expedition to fly back to his homeland. Thus we find Morrison reinforcing the fact that the roots of Afro-Americans lie in African heritage and culture. For the purpose, apart from the plot of the novel, she employs a number of elements towards enriching this sense of ancestorhood.

In her novels, Morrison can be seen often dramatizing the traditions of her community. Thus her works often resemble the oral technique of the storyteller. Just as an African woman storyteller does, Morrison narrates the tale of the Flying Africans. This is done with a purpose to rejuvenate the traditions and culture of her community. Morrison uses a number of storytellers in her text and Pilate is the most significant. Through Pilate Morrison tries to convey and retain the traditional role of African women as the guardians of rich cultural heritage and the transmitters of this cultural history to the future generations through oral techniques of storytelling. It is Pilate’s remembering of her past which sows the seeds for Milkman’s growth-both socially and psychologically. Moreover, the stories of his sister Lena, his mother Ruth, and his distant cousin Susan Byrd along with Pilate help Milkman to learn how to be a single separate Afro-American individual while remaining intricately entwined in relationship to a family, a community and a culture.

Through Pilate Morrison asserts and exemplifies African values and African culture that has been brought to America by their forefathers. She has stature, strength and presence associated with an ideal African woman. Macon Dead, Pilate's brother himself states thus: "If you ever have a doubt we from Africa, look at Pilate. She look just like Papa and he looked like all them pictures you ever see of Africans" (54). Another retrospection of African heritage can be had in the image of three generations of women living in harmony, plaiting hair and singing song. This recalls to our mind a scene from the African villages. But the difference with Afro-American life comes when we see that Pilate is unable to bring her extended family back together as a force to confront racial oppression. Morrison has very beautifully painted Pilate as the ancestor for Milkman whose nurturing transforms him into a responsible individual who is humane too. It is stories and songs, the children's songs turned into woman's blues which she passes on to her children that inspires Milkman to unravel the history and the lore of his family. The song that is sung by Pilate at his birth accompanies him throughout his life and helps Milkman to realize that he is a descendant of the Flying Africans who refused to exist under the confines and humiliities of slavery.

The myth of the Flying African, we can see, is being re-enacted from time to time as a ritual to enliven their past. This is what we draw from the novel. The novel opens with the symbolic flying of Robert Smith. As a member of the Seven Days which functions to liberate the black community from slavery and yearns to fly to freedom, Smith's act can be viewed as a remembering and reenacting of their past. This myth of Flying Africans is kept alive from time to time through such acts of Robert Smith. From Smith the tradition is taken on by Milkman when he finally surrenders himself to air at Solomon's Leap. He realizes what Shalimar knew: "If you surrendered to the air, you could ride" (34).

Song of Solomon, thus is one of the most impressive and substantial fiction by Morrison which elucidates how the past of a community makes its impression in re-creating a present rooted in this cultural past. The concept of knowing one's name, tribe and cultural heritage, the importance of the knowledge of the ethnic elements of one's community and its retention in the present, is paramount and very evident in the novel. She exposes the conflict.
of Western and African cultural perceptions and reveals the importance of African roots, heritage and values for Black Americans. Through the text Morrison asserts the necessity of stripping off the layers of hegemonic discourse which is subversive and which conceals the values of a civilization that lies underneath. The work is thus a discourse on the construction of a strong ethnic identity by re-creating the past through recalling the traditions, customs, lore, culture, experience and values that had originally gone into the making of an individual belonging to a particular community and thereby a distinct ethnic identity.

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