

PalArch's Journal of Archaeology  
of Egypt / Egyptology

THE SEARCH FOR ESSENCE OF THE SELF: A CRITICAL STUDY OF TONI MORISON'S  
SONG OF SOLOMON

*Dr. Mohamed Fathi Helaly Khalaf*  
Associate Professor, College of Arts and Science,  
Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University, KSA.  
Email: drhelaly\_2010@hotmail.com

**Dr. Mohamed Fathi Helaly Khalaf; The Search for Essence of The Self :A Critical Study of Toni Morison's Song of Solomon -- Palarch's Journal Of Archaeology Of Egypt/Egyptology 17 (9). ISSN 1567-21**  
**Keywords: Existentialism, authentic, freedom, choice, commitment, existence, meaningful**

### Abstract

The present study sheds light on the philosophical approach adopted by Toni Morrison in portraying the main characters in *Song of Solomon*. It examines the philosophical dimension of Toni Morrison. It is that dimension that is concerned with man's existence and being. Existentialism is a philosophical as well as a literary school of thought that is mainly concerned with individual freedom and responsibility as two aspects of man's meaningful existence. The study provides a textual analysis of the novel in question .In *Song of Solomon* Morrison presents Milkman and Pilate in situations with different paths to follow. Here, the endeavor of both characters to chart the paths of their lives and their attempts to overcome obstacles will be examined in large to highlight the existential aspect in the novel under discussion. Here, the novelist's approach will be examined in terms of her ability at weaving the prevailing social and cultural circumstances of the protagonist in different communities. The study also explores Milkman's refusal to be controlled by the traditional codes and his willingness to adapt to the requirements of his new being. In short, the study goes deep into the approach adopted by the writer also to examine aunt Piate's capability at making existentially free choices and demonstrating full responsibility for the consequences of such choices. The study will highlight the two characters own concepts of self and the perspective from which every one of them looks upon the surrounding community, its values and its social norms.

Existentialism is a philosophy of life. It has emerged as a reaction to man's feeling of the absurdity or meaninglessness of life. It stresses the need for a new approach; that is a new way of survival. It calls for man's independence of the values of his society and his need for creating new values in a world where materialism has been prevailing. Representing such a new attitude in life, as a literary movement, Existentialism has influenced the approaches of many diverse authors worldwide.. Existentialism calls for making free choices according to one's own needs and commitment to the consequences of such choices. In the light of Existentialism, human beings are to create reality for themselves by charting the directions of their lives and accepting responsibility for their choices. Of course, one's creation of the values and truths by which he wishes to live means creating a new self or existence.

Sartre and Existentialism have been synonymous as the two move hand in hand that they cannot be separated by any means. He is specifically referred to as the advocate of all that is important for the free movement of the mind. He is a profound thinker to say the least; a prophet of the human melancholy resulting from the suffocating conditions of human existence. Existentialism has diverse faces, conflicting colors, varied implications and profound approaches. In simpler terms, existentialism is a philosophy concerned with finding self and the meaning of life through free will, choice, and personal responsibility. The belief is that people search to find out who and what they are throughout life as they make choices based on their experiences, beliefs, and outlook. An existentialist believes that a person should make choices and be responsible without the help of laws, ethnic rules, or traditions.

Toni Morrison 1930 is one of the most outstanding African American writers whose concern in most of her writings has been the call for free and authentic existence Toni Morrison is read worldwide. Her books have been translated into many languages and read by different populations. Due to growing up in an ethnic and a racial community and being a contemporary of the Civil Rights Movement, Toni Morrison displays a unique approach in her writing. Of course, she is not the first African American writer to touch upon issues of man's existence, but her writings reveal deeper and more philosophical insights than any of her fellow black writers.

Toni Morrison has written a number of famous novels and she varies the concept of personal existence from one novel to another so as to draw upon issues that are universally significant. Here, the researcher aims at gaining new insights into man's life experience in the New World in general, and in African American experience in particular. Thus, Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* will be examined from a philosophical perspective with a special emphasis on characterization as a technical device employed by the novelist to portray existential characters and to illuminate the philosophical dimension of her writing.

*Song of Solomon* (1977) is the third novel written by Toni Morrison. It received both The National Book Critics Circle Award and the Friends of American Writer's Award establishing Toni Morrison as a major American writer. It is the story of a young man, Milkman Dead, a character with very conventional

values, who comes to a point at which he feels the need to find meaning for his existence. Milkman's life develops from complete dependence on others to a life of his own. In other words, the protagonist of this novel changes from taking whatever the others want him to know and to do to knowing everything himself in the process of searching for essence of his self.

Milkman seeks material gain, yet, he finds himself on a quest for something else; that is history. As he was young he used to make all those around him the providers of knowledge as they saw it. First, he is preoccupied with the search for the gold his father told him about. Yet, this changes to a preoccupation with the search for his family past and ancestors. Milkman wants to escape from the responsibility for doing something meaningful in his life by going on a journey prescribed by his father and supported by his friend Guitar. However, as the incidents of the story proceed, Milkman appears as escaping into responsibility rather than out of it.

In his journey to discover the origins of his family, Milkman develops from inauthenticity to authenticity. Milkman is to achieve, as Doreatha Mabalía puts it, "a strong and centered sense of self, a self that accepts responsibility for his past and reaches out in love for others." (55) In doing so, he flies from Michigan to free himself from the dead environment of the community in which he lives. Here, Morrison wants to underscore freedom which "can be achieved through the embrace of a folk history. As such, Milkman is looking forward to acquiring the magical power or authenticity characteristic of the existential heroes." (exampleessay.com p12)

Existentially, as one exists, he continually creates and recreates his individual essence in light of the different experiences that life offers. In light of his subjective perception of what is meaningful or meaningless to his existence, one's choices and decisions are made. To Kierkegaard and Sartre "a good productive life is one in which an individual is committed for the purpose of actualizing his true existential self." (Noonan 2)

One might regret the life he has created before and, as a result, he would develop a feeling of anxiety, despair and sorrow for once denying himself the chance to actualize his potentials. Existentially, such a person is a man of "bad faith". That is one's inability or unwillingness to make meaningful choices and his refusal to accept the responsibility for creating meaningful existence for himself. "Obliged to make our own choices, we can either confront the angst of the responsibility, or evade it by claiming obedience to some determining conventions or duty, thus acting in "bad faith" (Baldick 77)

According to the existential thought, human beings are born into nothingness. That is to say they come into existence without thoughts or beliefs. However, they are born with the ability to scrutinize or contemplate the world around them and, in the process they can do something out of this nothing. In other words, every man is to make choices since he is free to choose and to act.

However, such freedom is always accompanied by commitment:

Human beings are wholly free, but they are also wholly responsible for what they make of themselves. With this responsibility comes anxiety and often hopelessness which results in a human being choosing a pre-determined way of life or choosing to remove themselves from the world and live in self-imposed isolation. (Holman 176)

The protagonist of *Song of Solomon* is provided with opportunities to make choices in light of the knowledge and information about his ancestors that other people provide him with. In his development from youth into adulthood, Milkman, according to existentialism, must accept the responsibility to have control on his own destiny. That is he must create an essence of self in light of his own needs. In his journey for the supposed gold upon his father's request, Milkman loses faith in that request. He loses faith in his father's ideology and comes to realize that to lead an authentic life, he is to realize his potential of living a life of his own represented in his shift to search for his roots. He begins to have faith in himself to accept the responsibility for creating and pursuing his own sense of worth.

Through the story of Solomon, the flying African, Morrison wants to highlight the issue of existential freedom represented in his flight. It is that freedom which embraces ultimate responsibility on the part of the individual to decide the directions of his life. Here, Morrison constructs a myth in a way to emphasize identity based on freedom of choice in a historical context. Skillfully, she weaves the incidents of the story of Solomon in a way to demonstrate the quest for such freedom and identity adopting historical circumstances. In this context, Milkman embodies the values of his culture. As such, Morrison makes significant connections in her manipulation of existential themes through adapting myth to the black historical context.

What Morrison wants to underscore is that freedom is available to everyone. All the characters in the novel can, spiritually, fly and if they fail it is because they choose an inauthentic way in life. In the context of the African American experience, Morrison wants to highlight freedom that is accompanied by responsibility. Yet, there is always a conflict between freedom and social responsibility. In other words, what Morrison wants to highlight is that "truth compels one to get in touch with his heritage so as to comprehend his true self and establish a higher quality of existence: One that does not necessarily include or prelude material wealth." (Samuels8)

In *Song of Solomon* the central metaphor is flight. It suggests liberation whether literal or spiritual. Milkman, born at the moment of suicidal flight of a man, discovers that he comes from a family of flying Africans who previously sought freedom from slavery by escaping or flying back to Africa. Milkman's great-great grandfather escaped from slavery by flying away, yet his flight was not good for those left behind. That is to say his escape or flight was irresponsible because he never thought of actualizing his potentials in withstanding the values

of the society in which he lived. Similarly, Milkman used to live a life for others. His journey for the gold rather than his family roots is irresponsible much in the same way his ancestors' were. In this due light, Welfred Samuels remarks "Milkman is the spiritual and biological heir of Solomon who rebelled against his bondage in slavery with his flight back to Africa." (77)

Morrison's aim in *Song of Solomon* is to achieve an authentic personality for its hero. She wants to make it explicit that the ultimate responsibility and choices are Milkman's to make. She is greatly concerned with the roles that he is to play in charting the directions of his life. Again, Morrison wants to emphasize that self-actualization and personal freedom can be achieved only through individual actions. She wants also to reveal that the struggle for essence of the self is indeed complex. In other words, she wants also to convey that the quest for authentic existence inevitably involves the quest for truth, love and survival and even power. Morrison makes this explicit through the lessons Milkman learns directly and indirectly from his family.

Throughout his life, Milkman has an inexplicable fascination with flight. His discovery of identity lies in his ability to understand his own past. He comes to know who he is only when he understands and completes the song sung by the children in his ancestral hometown "Shalimar". Although he goes in search of his father's material legacy represented in gold, Milkman discovers his personal treasured legacy represented in his cultural identity and historical background.

In examining *Song of Solomon* as an existential novel, each of Milkman's experiences will be examined so as to assess the decisions he is to make; that is either to accept or reject. Also, examining the other characters' roles in his education and his quest for essence will be investigated.

Milkman grows up in a family that is life-denying, and as he grows, he acquires the attitude of his parents and his aunt. It is noteworthy pinpointing that the name "Dead" was given to the family accidentally after the civil war by a drunken white soldier. The name itself suggests the spiritual obstacles Milkman is to overcome so as to live as an independent man. It also signifies the domination of the white world over the black.

Milkman's father, Macon Dead II, the son of a former slave becomes a prosperous landowner. He with his sister Pilate witnesses the brutal murder of their father by local whites. Forced into flight, the two live off the wilderness with the help of a woman called Circe, a slave of the very family that has committed the murder of their father Macon Dead I. The two children are terrified by a white miner whom the brother has kills. They leave and never unite.

Macon Dead II is a domineering and unsympathetic sustainer who has no interest in his past or in his family heritage. He is the richest Blackman in the town. He cares nothing for people in general including his wife, sister and daughters. He is mainly interested in raising money. To him ownership is a mode of defense against the domineering white world. His philosophy in life is extremely materialistic transforming the world into a universe that can be bought

and protected. He is said to be, as the story tells us "a difficult man to approach, a hard man with manner so cool that it discouraged casual or spontaneous conversations." (25)

As he was young, Macon Dead II used to work side by side with his father on their own farm from the age of four. However, the murder of his father changes his view of life. He no longer has anything. He is to leave the farm for another place. He learns that land had a materialistic value as well as a spiritual one. What Macon absorbs is thoroughly materialistic. He believes that "money is freedom; the only real freedom." (179) Macon thinks that he does not own himself for he has become enslaved to the things he owns. He goes to instruct his son on his own set of truths. He says "You want to be a whole man, you have to deal with the whole truth: Couldn't be a whole man without knowing all that." (87)

Macon marries Ruth Foster, the daughter of the only black doctor in the neighborhood. Macon never appears a loving husband and this makes his wife emotionally attached to her father even after his death. In fact, Macon marries Ruth out of his need for personal and materialistic advancement rather than for love and affection. He is obsessed with material treasure which results in his continual disapproval of his family, particularly his wife. "His hatred for (Ruth) glittered and sparkled in every word he spoke to her." (45)

To Macon Dead II's mind, future success determines one's identity and justifies his actions in both past and present. Because of his materialistic attitude in life, Macon fails to consider his past as part of his existence. He adheres to rigid materialistic Western values. He defines himself and others by accumulation of property. Macon Dead II gives priority to possession over creation. He does not own himself because he becomes enslaved to the things he owns. Leon Lewis points out "After the murder of his father, Macon Dead II has resolved to win a place for himself in a conventional society. He has tied himself to a world that is corrupt and, as a result, he has infected himself and his family with hatred and contempt." (Magill 513)

In his relationship with his only son, Macon proves very rigid and materialistic. He is spiritually impoverished. He seeks meaning through him. He wants to instruct him on his materialistic philosophy in life. He advises his "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 other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too. (64)

According to Macon, life is money and possession. To have money is to have everything. Of course, such philosophy is of a direct impact on the character and development of Milkman. As Roberta Rubenstein puts It "Milkman is belittled by his father who gives him a role in his exploitative business dealing and who regards his son as an extension of his own needs. As such, Milkman grows up in an exaggerated patriarchal microcosm. (Gates141)

Thus, on the whole, Macon Dead II is first introduced as absorbing materialistic Western values and disregarding both his own status as a member of

a minority group and the circumstances of his family. Of course, Macon's actions manifest such attitudes either in his relationships with his wife, sister or even his son. Existentially, he is a man of "bad faith" in the sense of accepting what life imposes on him and never attempting to adopt or have an attitude other than the prevailing ones in his community.

Macon lives a life characterized by obsession with the idea of getting money and thereby power. That is to say he lives a life for money not for himself. Kieth E. Byerman remarks "Macon Dead II distorted the values of his father by emphasizing possession over creation." (Gates 115) Existentially, he wants to escape the responsibility of defying the challenges he is to face by making himself busy raising money. In a word, Macon Dead II is basically inauthentic. He is driven by an overwhelming desire to acquire material wealth. He never appears subjective.

Regarding the experiences of inauthenticity offered to Milkman, Ruth (his mother) is not an exception. She offers the most significant experience of inauthenticity. She is brought up by her father, the only black doctor in the town, after her mother's death. She grows up into womanhood without a distinctive personal identity. She is nurtured by the warmth of her father's love and has absorbed his ideals.

At the age of sixteen, Ruth marries Macon Dead II who would inherit her father's place after his death. With Macon she has an experience of a loveless marriage. She gives birth to two female children and Milkman the only male child. Ruth never finds Macon a loving husband. Macon rejects her and abuses her both physically and verbally. Of course, such an attitude of her husband makes Ruth more emotionally attached to her father even after his death. To ensure her continual affection for her father, Ruth goes to visit her father's grave at night to talk to him. She chooses to accept her father's big and great home which "pressed her into a small package." (137) She never rebels and remains submissive. She expresses her loyalty to her father in the following words. "It is important for me to be in his presence, among his things, the things he used, had touched. Later it was just important for me to know that he was in the world."(138)

Ruth remains starving for affection that she could not find with her unkind husband. Her attachment to her father reaches its climax when Macon sees her in bed with him (her father) kissing his fingers. The story tells us that "She had never dropped those expressions of affection that had been so loveable in childhood"(128). From the moment Macon sees her in bed with her father, he launches an endless attitude of contempt towards her. Once he tells Milkman "Whether or not, the fact is she was in that bed sucking his fingers, and if she does that when he was dead, what'd she do when he was alive? Nothing to do but kill a woman like that." (84)

On the other hand, Ruth finds in her son a means for compensating the affection she has lost with her husband. She goes to nurse him beyond infancy. She wants to validate her essence and being through her son. In fact, Ruth's act of nourishing her son beyond infancy is for her own satisfaction. "He was too young to be dazzled by her nipples, but he was cold enough to be bored by the flat taste of mother's milk."(113) She does not want him to grow into adulthood. As

Welfred Samuels puts it "Ruth provides Milkman with nourishment to sustain his life making it possible for him to become physically a man while symbolically remaining a child."(57)

Ruth tells Milkman that her father was the only one who ever loves her and that she reacts to his death by kneeling to kiss his hand. She also explains that he is the one who has saved his life with the help of aunt Pilate because his father desires no more children and insists that she abort the baby. As such, Ruth is robbed of a self that might result in meaningful personal development. She remains inauthentic because she has no independent self on which to stand. "She lives as dead though alive" (Samuels 56) She expresses her awareness of her lack of personal identity when she describes herself to Milkman "I didn't think I'd ever need a friend because I had him (her father) I was small but he was big. The only person who ever really cared whether I lived or died....He cared ....and there was, and is no one else in the world ever did." (137)

Thus, on the whole, in the quest for authentic existence. Ruth has very little to give. She lives a life for others and never tries to verify her own potentials to fashion a life of her own. Existentially, she is a woman of "bad faith" in the sense of regarding others and disregarding her own self. Here, Morrison wants to emphasize the consequences of inauthentic choice characterized by its being for "the Other".

It goes without saying that, from an existential point of view, Milkman's parents lead inauthentic way of life despite the difference in the attitudes they have adopted in their lives. From his father and mother Milkman has inherited two contradictory versions of the lives of the Dead.

At first, Milkman, like his parents, adheres to excessively rigid materialistic Western values. Before he leaves Michigan where he was born for Shalimar, the hometown of his ancestors, Milkman perceives the world in the same way that his father does. Morrison makes this explicit through the lessons he learns from his father and mother either directly or indirectly. First, Milkman lacks interest in the choices available to him by his parents and by his community. "All he knew about the world was what other people had told him. He felt like a garbage pail for the actions and hatred of other people. He had never acted independently." (133) He is in "bad faith" because he uses others to escape his own responsibility to define himself.

In the first part of the novel, Milkman appears as spoiled, self-centered, confused and an immature boy affected greatly by the tense atmosphere of his home and family. He seems aware of independence and individuality. Milkman cannot see himself as part of the whole because he cannot understand the nature of the part he will constitute. He has no sense of purpose other than his immediate wishes for comfort "He had won something and lost something in the same instant. Infinite possibilities and enormous responsibilities stretched out before him, but he was not prepared to take advantage of the former, nor accept the burden of the latter. So he cock-walked around the table." (168)



Milkman's journey began at age twelve. In Michigan he spends his first thirty years. He is ultimately alienated from every group and individual with whom he comes in contact. Once he tells his friend Guitar "Daddy wants me to be like him and hate my mother. My mother wants me to think like her and hate my father. Corinthians (his elder sister) won't speak to me; Lena (younger sister) wants me out. And Hagar (his cousin) wants me chained to her bed or dead. Everyone wants something from me." (242)

Macon Dead II tells Milkman about hiding out with his sister Pilate after the father Macon Dead I's murder in a cave by a white man whom he has killed. They have fled but the brother believes that Pilate later has returned to look for the gold which was in a green sack that Milkman later steals only to discover that it has bones. Obsessed with a means to get the gold, Milkman sets out in a journey to get it with the help of his friend Guitar. Here, Milkman's search for the gold indicates the vision he shares with his father of the world around him.

Upon leaving his hometown, Milkman believes that his past, represented in the sack of gold, will free him of any sense of his own identity. He believes that gold will provide him with, as Valerie Smith points out a "clean-lined definite self, the first sense of identity he has ever known." (Gates 281) Thus, the sense of freedom Milkman acquires is false. He believes that gold will provide him with freedom and that he will not submit to the claims of others including his father. He considers it a means of "beating a path away from his parents' past" (181)

Again, in his journey, Milkman struggles against an identity imposed by others. When the gold he sets out to discover turns out to be a bag of bones, Macon, again, sends his son to Pennsylvania where he believes the gold must still be buried. But failing to find it, Milkman goes to Shalimar in an effort to retrace Pilate's journey and to discover the hidden gold. Here, the search for gold takes on new meaning. It signifies a search for, as Susan Willis remarks, "the only unfetishized form of value and, in an allegorical sense, the retrieval of unfetishized human relationships." (Gates 217) Milkman has an insufficient sense of self. His understanding of his connection with others is not sufficient to inspire him with true perception of the past. He has a fragmented and distracted identity. "It was all very tentative, the way he looked, like a man peeping around a corner of some place he is not supposed to be, trying to make up his mind whether to go forward or to turn back." (170)

Milkman's mother is spiritually weak. She keeps nursing her son beyond infancy. She is the reason behind his acquisition of a nickname "Milkman" because of her extended nursing of him in an attempt to hold on to him in the same way. In his life, Milkman has to come to terms with such a name whose origin he never knows and with people who want to exploit him for their own favor. "Somehow everybody was using him for something or as something, working out some scheme of their own on him, making the subject of their dreams of wealth, or martyrdom."(185)

Milkman, first tries to define himself through the eyes of others. He finds that Guitar shares his dream. Although they come from different backgrounds, they manage to build a friendship. Thanks to Guitar, Milkman is led away from his stifling bourgeois upbringing. He teaches Milkman the novels' core lesson. "Wanna fly you got to give up shit that weighs you down." (169) Guitar appears as instrumental in Milkman's development and awareness. He introduces him to his aunt Pilate.

Like Ruth, Hagar, Pilate's granddaughter starves for affection and love. She also starves for a sense of her own being. She falls in love with Milkman who has sexual initiation with her. Milkman considers her as a sexual object rather than a part of his life. She claims that Milkman is "her home in the world." (115) However, Milkman goes to reveal his inability to understand her feelings and psychology despite their being in love for a long time. He appears insensitive to her and unwilling to bear responsibility for her in life. Now, Milkman comes to a point to break off his relationship with her. He prefers to write her a letter rather than facing her. "I want to thank you. Thank you for all you have meant to me. For making me happy all these years. I am signing this letter with love, of course, but more than that, with gratitude." (110) Existentially, he fails to accept responsibility for evading this relationship. It is noteworthy underscoring that his letter is little more than a business letter. He escapes responsibility for his affairs with her preferring to leave her for her own interests.

Thus, Milkman's experience with both Guitar and Hagar exposes him as a purely existential character. He is unable to accept responsibility for others. He flees from responsibility rather than into it. He is selfish, a characteristic that is purely existential. He wants to escape the effort of those around him to work out some schemes of their own "Above all he wanted to escape what he knew, escape the implications of what he had been told. And all he knew in the world was what other people had told him. He felt like a garbage pail for the actions and hatreds of other people. He himself did nothing....He had never acted independently." (133)

On the whole, the first part of Milkman's journey marks him as an existential hero leading a life of inauthenticity in light of the different experiences offered to him by other characters. Both his parents offer him the most inauthentic experience in his life. Moreover, in his relationships with both Guitar and Hagar, Milkman appears as a man of "bad faith "trying to escape the responsibility for his affairs with Hagar and its consequences.

By contrast, Milkman's aunt Pilate appears as completely different from the other members of the Deads. She is attached to no one. She has her own values and distinctive philosophy in life. She contradicts all of them. Pilate has a history and a true name which she literally carries with her in a small brass box fashioned into earrings. She has her special conditions of birth. She has delivered herself at birth and was born without a navel due to her mother's death during giving birth to her. Of course, this marks her as physically different.

In contrast to her brother Macon Dead II, Pilate's vision of the world is very expansive. She is the bearer of the past in forms of songs, stories and

personal belongings. She thinks that only by considering the past one can identify himself and his roots. She tells Macon "You can't take a life and walk off and leave it. Life is life. And the dead you kill is yours. They stay with you any way, in your mind. So it's a better thing, a more better thing to have the bones right there with you wherever you go. That way it frees up your mind".(183)

Here, it is clear that Pilate has a different approach to life. Despite presiding over a household like her brother, she provides a marked contrast to him and his ideology. Pilate gets used to carrying a sack of bones and a geography book with her as a reminder of the past. Melvin Dixon points out "Pilate is a restless wanderer who owns only those objects that implicitly direct her search for place." (Bloom 135) She is keen on creating the condition in which a renewal of family life can occur.

Born without a navel marks the physical evidence of Pilate's self-possession and self-creation. As such, she declares herself a self-begotten. The story tells us that she comes to life "dragging her own cord after birth behind her." (108) Here, Pilate thinks of herself, like Sula, as the mere creator of her own art. Having such conditions of birth signifies Pilate's propensity towards self-determination. She has strong belief that her lack of a navel makes of her a freak. "It was the absence of a navel that convinced people that she had come into this world through normal channels, had never lain floated, or grown in some warm and liquid place connected by a tissue-thin tube to a reliable source of human nourishment." (35)

Pilate never bothers about deprivation of sexuality as a result, instead she considers such a lack the basis for her liberation from traditional human relationships preferring relationships based on spiritual sensitivity. "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." (164)

Again, the missing navel initially sets Pilate's uniqueness. It represents her liberation from the emotional dependence that characterizes the other Dead women. Commenting on the circumstances of Pilate's missing of a navel and the condition of her birth, Valerie Smith remarks that they:

It makes her a character of larger-than-life dimension, one which has transcended the limitations of her historical moment and milieu. Her physical condition symbolizes her thorough independence of others, even as a fetus she did not need to rely on another person for sustenance. Her isolation and self-sufficiency enable her to throw away every assumption she had learned and begin at zero. (Gates 280)

Pilate is neither trapped nor affected by the decaying values of materialism like her brother. She is able to decide for herself what is important. Aware of her difference from those around her, she determines to live her life according to a very different set of values. Instead of conforming to the values of her family, she decides to disregard such values sticking only to what enforces her difference. She says "When am I happy and when am I sad and what is the difference? What do I

need to stay- alive? What is true in the world? (149) Thus, she is aware of how she wants to live and of what is valuable to her.

Pilate's values are based on her firm belief in the importance of freedom that implies moral responsibility for all her conducts. "Pilate had a deep concern for and about human relationships." (150) Her values are never distorted by any conventions. She refuses to cast blame on either cultural or personal forces accepting herself and others as she finds them. Pilate chooses a profession that might allow her the most freedom. She is willing to risk everything for her sense of right. In this due light, Leon Lewis remarks "Recognizing that she cannot count on any outside agency for support and realizing that she will survive only if she cultivates her own strength. Pilate rejects the outward attribute of standard femininity and chooses a deliberately simple life pattern that emphasizes the immediate and prize mobility and flexibility."(Magill 514)

Thus, Pilate's character is demonstrated through contrast. Morrison uses Pilate's individual strength as a foil for the conventional weakness of the other female character. "In a world of frightened, calculating people, Pilate is striking in her absolute fearlessness and in her refusal to be bound by the so-called rules of civilization, her life may be seen as a kind of crusade against any condition of limitation." (Magill 515) Through Pilate, Morrison wants also to test and defines the limits of individual freedom. Unlike many of Morrison's characters who appear as incapable of living in society and maintaining proper relationships -like Pecola and Ruth- Pilate lives a life of freedom. As Susan Willis puts it " Pilate's freedom which makes her different from everybody else, has a very curious explanation: namely the lack of a navel."(319)

Having her own set of truths, Pilate is able to guide Milkman toward self-realization. Early in the novel, Pilate appears as a life-saver. She helps Ruth to become acceptable by Macon who used to reject her. Moreover, she could save the life of Milkman after his father's attempt to have the pregnancy aborted. That is she helps in bringing him into the world. As Milkman grows up, Pilate goes to provide him with a sense of self in history. She is the first person to tell him about his great grandfather "Solomon". Consequently, Milkman begins to ask his father to add to his knowledge about his ancestors. Having the intention to direct Milkman away from his fruitless existence, she, we are told, "has as much to do with his future as she had with his past." (35)

Pilate appears as Milkman's teacher. She begins her lesson early in the novel when she tells him about her birth, her father and his death. Her lessons help Milkman to see the world with speculating eyes. "Pilate helped Milkman break free of the white ideological shell of his protected existence to see beyond the social encumbrances of wealth and status to the deeper meanings he finds in the dark." (Krumholz 11) In Pilate's household, Milkman finds love and safety until he can begin his journey for authentic existence. She becomes his instructor. She appears very instrumental in changing Milkman's view of life and his development

toward authentic personality.

On the whole, Pilate, despite living under the same circumstances that her brother and his family used to live, treads a completely different path. She has a path of her own. She disregards those truths or beliefs adopted by her family regarding only her own set of truths. Actually, she is a woman of "good faith" in the existential sense of fashioning a life of her own. Of course, Pilate's ideology in life finds a fertile land in Milkman's character because of his immediate needs for a different path in life to find essence for his self.

Thus, in light of what has been explored so far, it is obvious that Milkman's parents' visions are contradictory and his aunt's contradicts both. Now, he comes to a point where he is to decide the directions of his life in light of his present need for self-actualization.

By age thirty, Milkman displays a desire for change. He feels that he is just an object in the hands of his parents. That is he used to live a pointless and aimless life for others working out their schemes. Now, he resolves to take control of his life by declaring "I want to live my own life." (225) He develops a need for a new way of survival. In fact, such pronouncement implies a desire that overcomes the material world of his parents. Truly, it is an existential pronouncement that signifies independence and authenticity.

Milkman used to lack interest in the choices made available to him by the community in which he lives. Gradually, he begins to do everything to be different. He develops a new sense of awareness that his father's life is meaningless. Milkman's mother does not want him to grow into adulthood. As he grows up, he comes to see her as silly and selfish. He finds her without a personal identity and that she has very little to give him.

Now, Milkman embarks on a quest for personal existence. He reveals "What good is a man's life if he can't even choose what to die for?" (243) He leaves in search of the original home of his grandfather. Yet, his quest is ambivalent. On the one hand, he wants the gold which he believes Pilate has hidden. On the other, he wants to know the story of his family. In both, the more he explores the more he finds differences more than the expected. That is a new definition of his self. Milkman's act of identification can be seen as an act of differentiation. He is to create a new meaning for his existence. Again, Morrison wants to highlight the central issue of existential freedom. That is one's responsibility to decide on the directions of his life.

Morrison wants also to stress that individual actions are means for personal freedom and self-actualization. In this due light, Susan Blake notes "although Milkman can not achieve identity without recognizing community, the identity he achieves is individual." (Gates 69) The ultimate choices are Milkman's to make. He is free but his freedom must be accompanied by responsibility. He resolves to fly into history and responsibility rather than into material gains or irresponsibility. Finding freedom in accepting his new status as real, Cynthia A.

Davis remarks "By conceiving his self as both a free individual and a member of the social group, the hero unites his free and factitious natures and becomes part of the historical process by which the struggle for self-actualization is both complicated and fulfilled. (Bloom 17)

Again, Morrison uses flight in its common association to signify freedom and individual independence. In the second part of his journey, Milkman feels freed of the values of his family. That is to say his quest shifts from one for material gain to one for knowledge to find essence for his self. As Linda J. Krumholz puts it "Milkman's quest for freedom changes from the freedom obtained through the solitary power of money to the freedom gained through connections to others, imaginative engagement and love." (109) Metaphorically, Milkman wants to take flight in the way his great grandfather did. In this flight he discovers that his dreams can be attainable. He finds in the past of his ancestors the essence he is searching for. In this due light, Valerie Smith points out "Knowing oneself derives from learning to reach back into history in relationship to others. Milkman bursts the bonds of the Western, individualistic conception of self, accepting in its place the richness and complexity of a collective sense of identity. (Gates 283)

Previously, Macon Dead II sends Milkman to steal the green sack which he believes to contain the treasure hoisted in the ceiling of Pilate's house. However, when the assumed treasure turns out to be a bag of bones, he sends his son to Pennsylvania where he believes the gold must still be buried. Failing to find it there, Milkman goes to Shalimar (his ancestors' hometown) in an attempt to retrace Pilate's journey and discover the hidden gold. Milkman's journey to Shalimar places him in the presence of his past. It marks the point at which he begins his separation from and abandonment of those values on which his father has raised him to take a journey into self.

In his journey to Shalimar, Milkman is helped by Circe who used to work for the family whose boss has previously killed Milkman's grandfather Macon Dead I. She provides him with knowledge that is crucial to his discovery of his family heritage. Circe's knowledge leads Milkman to the cave where his grandfather has been killed. Accompanied by Pilate, Milkman comes to know that the bones in the sack belong not to the white man that Macon' has previously killed but to his grandfather (Macon Dead I) Helped by Pilate, Milkman returns the bones to the cave for proper burial. With Circe, Milkman begins to ask the object of his quest. She recalls the relationship of the real name of his great-great grandfather "Solomon".

From now on, Milkman is to strip himself off any previous values and to have his own set of values for authentic knowledge. He has to get rid of those fragile truths that others used to instruct him on and to develop his own set of truths instead. Here, he is to undergo a lot of experiences offered by the people of Shalimar, and, in the process, he finds a new definition of himself. Now, he is in the presence of the past. As Kimberly W. Benston remarks "in the second part of *Song of Solomon*, Milkman renews the traditional search for the properly-named self in a journey which turns upon his own choice." (Spillers 102) Milkman needs to learn a new kind of literacy. He needs to find knowledge related to his own life

for self-creation. Knowledge that enables him to see beyond the limited and the familiar. Samuel Allen points out "Morrison achieves an unusually skillful transition from a precisely described Michigan town into a timeless mythological world of quest for meaning and identity. Milkman develops from an indulged and self-indulging child into a dangerously won maturity." (Mackay 30)

Milkman discovers that he can only find what he is by discovering what his family is. By conceiving himself as free, Milkman is able to realize his quest. He combines subjective freedom with objective facts to define himself in both. Most important, Milkman discovers that only in commitment he is free. Again, in Shalimar, he begins to start friendships with the people there. He feels that he can be his own man. As the story tells us, Milkman feels that he belongs to the earth he is walking on. He no longer needs material possession to distinguish him from the people around him.

As Milkman is in Shalimar, he hears the children reciting rhymes that are vaguely meaningful to him. He begins to recollect such rhyme and decipher them and finds that they include the narrative of his family. The folktale of the flying Africa, Solomon, who one day discovers his magical power and resolves to use it to fly back to Africa. To escape slavery, Solomon left behind a wife and twenty one children including Jake Milkman's great-great grandfather. Thus, he learns the relation of the story to his identity. Milkman's discovery of his great-great grandfathers' real name and their heritage is essential to his own self-discovery and understanding of his own past. Accordingly, Milkman begins to know who he is only when he can understand, complete and sing the song of his ancestors.

Milkman appears a riddle-solver. Dorothy Lee points out "he begins to find his treasure, the gift of self-knowledge to his people." (Samuels 78) The children's dance of the Song of Solomon is the key of his discovery of his link with "Jay" or Jake, the son of Solomon whose flight back to Africa is commemorated in the subject song. Upon hearing the name of his great-great grandfather, Milkman feels that he becomes free of those binding or restricting materialistic values of the past. He feels that the song is pregnant with significations. Here, the meaning of the song corresponds to the growing awareness of Milkman's strengths. Now, he feels that he has the ability to fly, to be free; something that he is willing to sacrifice his life for. Here, flight has another meaning; it means the abandonment of other people.

Thus, in the course of his search, Milkman discovers that he finds something more valuable than gold. Such discovery enables him to begin to understand who he is in the present and offers him the possibility of a free future that may enable him to become like his legendary grandfather. As such, he can have access to a new heritage that includes the power of character to live without a lust for material gains. He is no longer in need to exploit others nor submit to their wills. In a word, Milkman finds the way to real freedom. In this due light, Melvin Dixon contends "Now he can ride the air. Milkman's leap of surrender is his ultimate performance, a flight he has earned by doffing his vanities. His leap

transcends the rootedness and the freedom he has gained. His flight demonstrates self-mastery and control." (Bloom 141)

In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison wants to make it clear that the struggle for authentic existence is always accompanied by the quest for truth. Milkman undergoes a variety of experiences to come to term with this quest. His journey into the past signifies his ultimate self-actualization and freedom. He struggles to understand the historical truths that lead to the recognition of his cultural roots. In his journey he surrenders his needs to be wanted or infantilized by others. At the end of his journey, Milkman discovers his inheritance and essence of the self-acknowledging that such a discovery leads to full integration of his self.

At the end of the novel, Milkman has restored the names of his family and he can fly. He comes to absorb and fully understand his great-great grandfather's slogan. "For now he knew what Shalimar knew: if you surrender to the air you could ride it." (363) He understands the significance of such a slogan. He knows that only through freedom and responsibility for this freedom can he achieve essence of the self. As such, he is finally reconciled with his ancestors understanding their philosophy and their actions. Commenting on this Karen Carmean's indicates:

The escape from the earth- flight- (on the part of Milkman's great grandfather) stands as a symbol for the refusal to be satisfied by a life without choice. At the nadir of his life, Milkman uses whatever available to please his self. And at the conclusion of his quest, he has overcome social and personal enslavement to achieve self-sufficiency and self-regard. Milkman becomes a man whose sense of courage has given his spirit wings.(Magill 515)

Thus, in *Song of Solomon* Morrison makes use of flight to signify freedom. She wants to underscore that freedom is available to all people and that it is their role to freely chart their lives. However, this freedom should embrace responsibility. Through the story of Solomon- the Flying African- she makes mythic structure central to her existential manipulation of the issue of freedom. Cynthia Davis remarks "Morrison adopts the myth to the black historical context to reconcile freedom with facticity on both individual and collective levels." (Bloom 19) Solomon becomes a powerful symbol of freedom by flying back to Africa in an attempt to escape slavery. Milkman could only fly after he commits himself to a new set of values. He is able to create a meaningful life in light of his own set of truths.

Again, in portraying the character of Milkman and his development from inauthenticity to authenticity, Morrison is concerned with the issue of existential freedom. She is concerned with the significant roles that Milkman is to assume in deciding the directions of his life; a life which, as Welfred D Samuels remarks, "must skirt "bad faith" and be steeped in the existential responsibility to act."(53) First, Milkman sets out to seek gold, his father's concern, but ends his journey seeking his own concern represented in Pilate's authentic values. In other words, Milkman's search develops from one for material legacy represented in his father's



materialistic attitude to a personal treasured one represented in the song about his forefather's communal past. Sand Russell remarks "The hero pursues material gain but instead he finds himself on a quest for his history. The journey eventually gains him spiritual freedom."(MacKay 44)

On the whole, in *Song of Solomon* Morrison could succeed in depicting universal characters capable of expressing existential themes one way or another. The entire novel can be seen as a guide for anyone who has lost the capacity to assume authentic acts in his life. It can also be seen as an incentive for all people to awake such dormant faculty within the human mind and heart. It is an invitation for everyone to have a philosophy of his own in life. In a word, Milkman's struggle is in reality a universal one for it involves the process of self- discovery and self-actualization.

In *Song of Solomon* Morrison demonstrated the difficulty Milkman was to experience in his journey for authenticity. She demonstrated his development from youth to adulthood underscoring his responsibility for charting the directions of his life. Morrison was keen on providing him with a variety of experiences and allowing him to make choices that were existentially responsible. He was to take control of his destiny according to his own personal needs. He had to create his own reality or set of truths. Milkman's father provided him with those values that he absorbed from his society and Milkman accepted them. At first, he was guided by the "Other" represented in his father's materialistic values. Then, he developed a set of values that were his own. He realized his potentials of living a life of his own represented in his search for the origin of his ancestors. At the end, Milkman succeeded in finding the origin of his family as a result of having a belief in his own self and accepting the responsibility for creating and pursuing his own sense of worth.

#### Works Cited

##### **Primary Sources:**

- Toni Morrison. "*Song of Solomon*." 1977. New York Plume, 1978
- Bloom, Harold. *Modern Critical Interpretations: Toni Morrison's Sula*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1999
- Bloom, Harold. Ed. Harold. *Modern Critical Views*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1990
- Gates, Henry Louis, Jr. and Appiah. Eds. Toni Morrison: *Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, New York: Amistad Press, 1993
- Giroux, Christopher. Ed. *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. New York: Gale Research Inc., 1995
- MacKay, Nellie. Ed. *Critical Essays on Toni Morrison*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1988
- Magill, Frank N. . *Masterpieces of African American Literature*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1992
- Spillers, Hortense J. Ed. *Comparative American Identities: Race, Sex and*

Nationality in The Modern Text. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company,1991\_

### **Secondary Sources:**

Ali. Azza Mohamed. The Existential Aspect in Steinbeck Fiction. A PhD

Hassan, Ihab. Radical Innocence: Studies in The Contemporary Novel. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973

Holman, C. Hugh. "Existentialism" A Handbook to Literature. Fourth Edition: Indianapolis: Bobs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 198

Krumholz, Linda J. "Reading in The Dark: Knowledge and Vision in Song of Solomon." Ed. Kathryn Earled. Approaches to Teaching The Novels of

Toni Morrison. New York: The Modern Language Association of

America, 1997

Mabalia, Doreatha D. Toni Morrison Developing Class Consciousness. Cranbury, New York : Association University Press, 1991

Noonan, Christine. The Search of The Self: An Existentialist Analysis of Nathaniel

Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," "The Minister's Black Veil," and " Wakefield". An MA thesis. Southern Connecticut State

University,

2006

Rodriguez, Eusebio. "The Telling of Beloved" Journal of Narrative Technique. Vol.21, No.2 (Spring 1991).Ed. Christopher Giroux. Contemporary Literary Criticism. New York: Gale Research Inc., 1995

Russell, Sand. "It's Ok to Say Ok". Ed. Nellie MacKay. Critical Essays on Toni Morrison. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1988

Samuels, Welfred D. and Clenora Hudson-Weems. Toni Morrison. Boston: Twayne, 1990

Smith, Barbara. "Beautiful, Needed, Mysterious" Ed. Nellie MacKay. Critical Essays on Toni Morrison. Boston: G. K. Hall,1988

Smith, Valerie. "*Song of Solomon*: Communities of Community". Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Appiah. Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present. New York: Amistad Press, 1993

Spillers, Hortense J. "A Hateful Passion, a Lost Love" Ed. Harold Bloom. Modern Critical Interpretations: Toni Morrison's Sula. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1999

Willis, Susan. "Eruptions of Funk: Historicizing Toni Morrison" Ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Appiah. Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present New York : Amistad Press, 1993

### **On Line Sources**

<http://exampleessays.com/essay-search/outside-world.htm>> August 6 2006

[http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Nathan\\_Scott&oldid=223108424](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Nathan_Scott&oldid=223108424)

Long,1996 <<http://www.mindpleasers.com>> July 18, 2002  
The Washington Post (Pre-1997 fultext) Washington, D. C.: Feb 21, 1993. P.9 X.  
03  
September 13,2006 on < <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did> >