

Women' s Song of Lament Behind the Grand Flying in Song of Solomon

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Abstract. Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* is an extraordinary work in African American literature, renowned for its rich narrative and exploration of themes including self-discovery, freedom, sacrifice and African American culture. However, behind the grand "flying" events of men were the endless lament, struggle and sacrifice of women, which have always been ignored. This paper takes Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* as the research object and explores the lament of women behind the significant imagery of "flying". By analyzing three key "flying" events in the novel, it reveals the sacrifices and sufferings of female characters in the process of male protagonists' pursuit of freedom and self-discovery. Although male characters in *Song of Solomon* achieved spiritual freedom and growth through flying, this process was built upon the pain, oppression and self-sacrifice of women. This paper calls for attention to the lament of women behind men and emphasizes that women should break free from the shadow of men to pursue their own freedom and growth. Through the analysis of female characters in *Song of Solomon*, it hopes to inspire future generations to further reflect on gender equality and female autonomy, arguing that women bravely pursue their dreams and realize their own value.

Keywords: Women's Lament, Flying Legend, Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*, African American Literature.

1. Introduction

1.1. Toni Morrison

Toni Morrison was born in Ohio. Because of racial discrimination, her family migrated from Ohio to the American South and then to the North for work. Both her parents were proud of black culture, so she grew up learning countless black songs and listening to southern black folklore. As a well-known African American writer, her works are brief and poetic with great passion, famous for their keen observations of black people's life in America.

1.2. Song of Solomon

Song of Solomon is divided into two parts, which are Milkman's rich but disordered life in Michigan in Northern America, and Milkman's journey to the south in search of his family roots. Born into a wealthy black middle-class family, Milkman was rich in his material life. Unfortunately, with the bad influence of his father, Milkman grew up into a selfish, self-indulgent playboy who looked down upon his mother and two sisters. With the initial purpose of searching for gold, he traveled to southern America with his friend Guitar. In the land of Shalimar where his ancestors used to settle, he overheard a folk rhyme sung by the children there and accidentally found the story of his family root. With the influence and guidance of his aunt Pilate, Milkman gradually realized his previous mistakes and regretted what he had done to the people who loved him. During his journey to find his root, Guitar misunderstood that Milkman took all the gold privately, so they went from best friends to enemies. At the end of the story, when Milkman was helping Pilate to bury the bones of her father, Pilate was shot by Guitar and passed away. And milkman, with firing rage, jumped out from his hiding place to face Guitar who's gun was raised. He was most likely to end up falling to his death or shot by Guitar, but this was the real moment that he truly mastered "flying".

2. Literature Review

As the most famous novel written by Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* has been thoroughly analyzed by scholars at home and abroad, receiving enthusiastic responses and high praises.

2.1. Previous Studies on *Song of Solomon* at Home

Academic journals concerning *Song of Solomon* markedly outnumber dissertations conducted by scholars, but their topics and focuses overlap to a large extent. Major topics include ecofeminism, magic realism, black identification, and biblical prototype interpretation.

Mosemujia (2011) adopted postcolonial cultural theory to analyze Toni Morrison's cultural identity in *Song of Solomon*, revealing the difficult journey of constructing a bicultural identity and the role that traditional African American culture plays in this construction. Xiaoju Rong (2013) conducted a biblical archetypal reading of *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon* based on Northrop Frye's theory of archetype. She also focused on archetypal imageries including apocalyptic imagery and demonic imagery to understand Morrison's wish and sympathy for those African American people. Lijie An (2014) made a comparison between *Song of Solomon* and *The Abandoned Capital* by Jia Pingwa. She analyzed the magical realism factors existing in both novels, focusing on the application of magical elements and narrative techniques, thus proving the existence of something common and universal among different cultures. Jinyan Li (2016) reinterpreted *Song of Solomon* from the perspective of ecofeminism, analyzing the connection and interdependence between humans, deconstructing their patriarchal dualism. She came to the conclusion that only when men learn from women to be part of nature can they draw wisdom and power from it, and only when men understand and care about women can they live harmoniously.

2.2. Previous Studies on *Song of Solomon* Abroad

Foreign scholars also conducted studies on *Song of Solomon*. In her work *Toni Morrison: Historical Perspectives and Literary Contexts*, Linden Peach emphasized the heated critical debates that Morrison's fiction has generated. She also concluded that African heritage is of great significance in shaping African American's cultural identity. In *Women Who Make a Man: Female Protagonists in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon*, Soophia Ahmad shed light on the stories of all female characters, including abandoned Ryna, submissive Ruth, tragic Hagar, oppressed Lena and Corinthians and brave Pilate. It was them who shaped his quest and made such a self-discovery possible.

Generally speaking, scholars at home and abroad both conducted comprehensive and thorough researches on Toni Morrison and *Song of Solomon*. As an important image which was repeated several times in the novel, "flying" has also been analyzed by some Chinese scholars. However, most of them focus on the flying of men, failing to see "flying" from the perspective of women. This essay depicts the image of "flying" in females' eyes, revealing their road of tears, blood and lament behind the grand success of males.

3. The Three "Flying"s in *Song of Solomon* and Women's Lament Behind Them

3.1. Mr. Smith's flying

"The North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance agent promised to fly from Mercy to the other side of Lake Superior at three o'clock." Wearing his wide blue silk wings curved forward around his chest, Mr. Smith jumped off the roof of Mercy and died. At this moment, Ruth, who was pregnant with Milkman, was frightened and went into labor. And the baby's aunt, Pilate, sang in a loud voice, "Big Brother Sweetness has flown away," and predicted that the baby would be born the next morning, symbolizing that Milkman's fate was closely tied with flying.

It seems that Mr. Smith's flying was a great, consecrate and stirring opening ceremony for Milkman's birth, indicating that Milkman was to be born out of the ordinary. However, by analyzing

the females involved in this event, the lament of women behind this grand flying can be revealed. When Mr. Smith appeared on the roof, Ruth and her daughters dropped the covered peck basket and spilled all the red velvet rose petals. Lena and Corinthians were scrambled about trying to grab the petals, while Ruth moaned and held the underside of her stomach.

In the novel, Ruth, the coddled daughter of a rich doctor, married Macon Dead, who was soon tired of her. At home, she was an obedient woman who “began her days stunned into stillness by her husband’s contempt and ended them wholly animated by it”. Outside, she dressed up well for her husband to show off to the poor. With Pilate’s help, she finally got pregnant with Milkman who was conceived owing to an aphrodisiac from Pilate. As a woman who was going to give birth soon, Ruth had to come out on a snowy day, carrying the big basket to help her daughters sell velvet, without the company of her husband. The image of a woman who was detested and oppressed by her husband jumps off the page.

Lena and Corinthians were daughters of Ruth and Macon Dead. But their father didn’t treat them as daughters, but as properties. When they were little girls, Macon Dead brought them to the icehouse. They had to dress up in white stockings, ribbons, and gloves, so that the workers there could see them and envy their father. Macon Dead forbade their marriages, so Lena and Corinthians could just sit like two big baby dolls before a table, making scraps of red velvet every day. Instead of looking at Mr. Smith, who jumped off the roof, or their mother, who was holding her stomach and moaning, they chose to pick up the velvet petals that had fallen to the ground. They were trapped in the house like tame canaries, succumbing to their father’s authority, with no thoughts or choices of their own. Their lives revolved around velvet petals, Macon Dead and Milkman.

The sufferings of Ruth and her two daughters vividly demonstrated the tragic fate of imprisoned and repressed black women. As Zora Neale Hurston said in her famous novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, “Black women in particular are ‘the mules of the world’”. Black males bear the abuse of white injustice and then take their anger out on black women. Milkman was the first colored baby born inside Mercy, indicating that Mercy refused to accept colored pregnant women before. Only because Ruth was scared into premature labor by Mr. Smith’s flying, she was exceptionally accepted by Mercy, and gave birth to Milkman inside the hospital instead of on its steps like the black women before. “Mercy” was a name symbolizing kindness, inclusiveness and fairness, but the hospital named “Mercy” was even not willing to admit colored women. The hypocritical benevolence of the white race and the unfair oppression, suffering and persecution confronted by black women were abundantly clear.

3.2. Solomon’s Flying

“Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone. Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home.” According to the folklore, some black men can fly, and Milkman’s great-grandfather was one of them. Early black people who were trafficked into slavery in the Americas suffered humiliation and oppression. They always dreamed that one day they could have wings and fly back to their homes in Africa to become free and independent. As Susan Byrd mentioned in her conversation with Milkman, when Solomon and his family were working in the cotton plantation near the hill, Solomon flew away like a bird. He ran up to the hill, spun around a couple of times, and was lifted up in the air. He flew back to Africa, became a brave, free and independent legend among his offspring and never came back. Solomon’s flying was viewed as an unyielding struggle which condensed the deepest and eagerest desire of the oppressed black people for freedom and equality.

However, what lied behind the grand flying of Solomon? It was his wife’s endless sufferings. After knowing his great-grandfather’s identity, Milkman told Sweet that Solomon took off alone, came back to his hometown. He was fed and clothed from then on, never had to grow cotton again, and was never oppressed by a slave owner again, but he left all his family, including his wife Ryna and his twenty-one child. As a wife who saw her husband run away with her own eyes, leaving her and her children behind, Ryna was almost killed. She cried and screamed out loud for days, then she completely lost her mind and finally died of grief. People used “Ryna” to name a valley. When the

wind blew in the valley and made a desolate sound, they said it was Solomon's wife crying. Solomon got his happiness and freedom, but his family could just helplessly watch him flee. Just like the folklore sang, "O Sugarman don't leave me here; Cotton balls to choke me; O Sugarman don't leave me here; Buckra's arms to yoke me..." They still had to live their miserable lives in bondage to their slave masters, never returning to their hometown in Africa.

Moreover, according to Solomon's legendary, he took his youngest son, Jake, who was Milkman's grandfather, together with him, but he brushed too close to a tree and the baby slipped out of his arms and fell through the branches to the ground. In fact, Heddy found the baby near the porch of the big house. Without doubt, black people couldn't fly in a real sense. The only explanation is that during his flight, Solomon originally took the baby with him, but soon discarded him near other people's house. So the only child he took away was also abandoned mercilessly.

To some extent, Solomon was a great national hero for the black race, but he never deserved to be called a great husband or a great father. His grand flying came at the expense of abandoning his wife and children. He flew high into the sky, but his family were forever chained on the ground. He regained freedom, but his sense of family responsibility was left in the land of misery.

3.3. Milkman's Flying

After learning the story of his ancestors, Milkman discarded all external material things, including the wardrobe box, necktie and three-piece suit, breaking away from the worldly money-oriented values instilled by his father. With the help of Pilate, he got his soul cleansed and found the roots of his family. He also repented deeply for what he did to his mother, sisters and lover. Finally, he buried the bones of his ancestors in the land of his homeland and became truly integrated with his people. In the end, after Guitar killed Pilate, Milkman jumped resolutely towards his former friend's gun, and "as fleet and bright as a lodestar", he became one with the wind and with the flying legend of black people. Finally, Milkman also became a legend, and his name would surely be memorized by future generations.

However, seen from the perspective of women, similar to Solomon, the heroic flying of Milkman also came at the expense of maltreating and abandoning the women around him, including Ruth, Lena and Corinthians, and Hagar, whose tears, blood and lives lifted Milkman's great flying.

Ruth had been protecting Milkman's life since before he was even born. By that time, Macon Dead had already been tired of her and even tried to have Milkman aborted, while Ruth was steadfast in her determination to have him. Initially, Milkman was just indifferent to his mother. He had never loved his mother, but had always known that she had loved him. Never had he thought of his mother as a person, an independent individual. However, Milkman still had the consciousness to protect his abused mother, fighting against his father's authority. When he saw Macon Dead using his fist smashing Ruth into her jaw, Milkman unconsciously yanked his father by the back of his coat collar, up out of his chair, and knocked him into the radiator. Then he warned Macon Dead not to touch Ruth again. At that time, Milkman was still a relatively upright man. Although he was over-protected by Ruth, at least he could tell from justice and evil.

However, on the night after their conflict, Macon Dead knocked on the door of Milkman's room and told him his dirty, filthy and indecent guess of the relationship between Ruth and her father, making Milkman misunderstand that Ruth had an immoral incest with her father, since when the image of Ruth dramatically changed in his mind. Ruth was no longer portrayed as a mother who simply adored her only son, but as an obscene woman playing dirty games with whatever male was near. From then on, Milkman began to despise his mother. He began to hate Ruth because she nursed him when he was old enough to talk, stand up, and wear knickers, which made people give him the nickname "Milkman". From then on, with Macon Dead's detrimental impact imposed on Milkman, he gradually became an ungrateful, cold-blooded. From then on, he began to use the meanest words and nastiest looks to treat Ruth. When he saw Ruth mourning her father in Fairfield Cemetery, he was even more convinced that his mother was a silly, selfish, queer, weak and obscene woman. He used the worst words to hurt her, "Is that what you've been doing all these years? Spending a night

every now and then with your father?" Ruth's pain and grief after hearing such insulting words from her own son was definitely unimaginable. Before Milkman was born, Macon Dead forced her to drink a half ounce of castor oil, made her sit on a hot pot recently emptied of scalding water, and even punched her stomach to abort Milkman. Ruth endured all these cruel sufferings to give birth to Milkman. But the boy she protected with her life was the one who hurt her the most.

Similar to Ruth, Milkman's two sisters, Lena and Corinthians, also grew up under abuse, despicability and suppression. Not only were they used as personal properties by their father to show off, but they were also bullied by their brother Milkman. For all those years, they had been laughed at, used, ordered and judged. They've done far more for Milkman as sisters. When he slept, they had to be quiet. When he was hungry, they had to cook. When he wanted to play, they had to entertain him. Their girlhood was spent like a found nickel on him. However, he never cared about them, never asked one of them if they were tired, or sad, or wanted a cup of coffee. Milkman even wanted to use his right as a man to decide their lives. When 47-year-old Corinthians fell in love with Porter, a man whom Milkman thought was "not good enough", he despicably tried to snitch on her sister to Macon Dead in order to snuff out Corinthians's first love in the cradle. Like he looked down on his mother, he similarly imposed his male power on his two sisters.

Additionally, what accompanied Milkman's flying was the tragedy of Hagar. Hagar was Pilate's grand-daughter. She spends all her youth on Milkman, only to be mercilessly abandoned and died in great sorrow.

Milkman met Hagar for the first time when he was twelve, and thought that he fell in love with her. "But Milkman had no need to see her face; he had already fallen in love with her behind." In fact, Milkman didn't fall in love with Hagar, but with her butt. She stayed with Milkman for twelve years, but Milkman had never taken her to meet their friends, so everyone knew that he never treated her as a real or legitimate girl friend, or someone he might marry, but as his private honey pot to sleep with. Gradually, Milkman met more and more girls of his own age and soon got tired of Hagar. "Her eccentricities were no longer provocative and the stupefying ease with which he had gotten and stayed between her legs had changed from the great good fortune he'd considered it, to annoyance at her refusal to make him hustle for it, work for it, do something difficult for it." She was the third beer. Not the first or second one that burned, but the third beer Milkman drank only because she was there.

Oppositely, Hagar gradually fell in love with Milkman. "She began to pout, sulk, and accuse him of not loving her or wanting to see her anymore." Without doubt, Hagar had already treated Milkman as her family, eagerly looking forward to marrying him and forming a family with him. In contrast, when she was imagining their future, Milkman tried to think of a way out. Finally, Milkman decided to end their relationship. He wrote a letter, using conscienceless, hypocritical words like "gratitude" and "thank you", and sent the letter together with some cash to Hagar. Hagar detonated. From then on, she monthly searched the barrels and cupboards and basement shelves for some comfortably portable weapons with which to murder Milkman. She tried to kill Milkman six times, and obviously, her revenges failed. Finally, after the last time Hagar tried to kill Milkman with a knife and was frustrated, immersed in her desperate love for Milkman, Hagar went insane. She was either unconsciously sitting in a chair by the window or lying in bed fingering her hair, totally neglecting the delicious meals and exquisite gifts that Pilate and Reba found for her. Things changed when one day after Pilate showed her a compact made of goldlike metal with a pink plastic lid, she suddenly seemed to be back to normal. In fact, it's a flashback of her sanity before she died. Hagar took a bath and washed her hair with shampoo. Then she went downtown and bought nice clothes, shoes, perfumes and cosmetics, and reached Lilly's Beauty Parlor to get her hair done. When she was coming back home, the stormy rain drenched her. However, she ignored her soaked clothes and trembling body, even though terminally ill, she never forgot to dress herself up for Milkman.

Toni Morrison described Hagar's last make-up for Milkman in detailed and vivid language, which added to her pathetic ending. "She drew charcoal gray for the young round eye through her brows, after which she rubbed mango tango on her cheeks. Then she patted sunny glow all over her face. Mango tango disappeared under it and she had to put it on again. She pushed out her lips and spread

jungle red over them. She put baby clear sky light to outwit the day light on her eyelids and touched bandit to her throat, earlobes, and wrists. Finally she poured a little youth blend into her palm and smoothed it over her face.” And then, she opened her door with the appearance of a ghost, “the wet ripped hose, the soiled white dress, the sticky, lumpy face powder, the streaked rouge, and the wild wet shoals of hair.” When she saw her horrifying appearance in the mirror, a high fever came, after which she lost her mind completely. Even before her death, she still asked that question repeatedly, “Why don’t(doesn’t) he like my hair?” It wasn’t until she was dying that she realized Milkman never loved her. Even before she passed away, she hadn’t understood why Milkman never loved her, but remained stubbornly convinced that Milkman detested her black appearance, so she had to please him through make-up. Ultimately, she died in endless despair, sorrow and pain. With Milkman’s indifference and ignorance, Hagar, who used to be a coddled chubby little girl weighed down with hair, became an insane woman who would like to please a man even at the expense of erasing her racial identity and precious life.

Milkman also hurt Pilate, his aunt who protected his life even before he was born, the one who made the best perfect soft-boiled egg he ever had, the one who determinedly supported him to find his family root. What did Pilate get in return for her kindness to Milkman? Nothing. When Milkman heard from Macon Dead that Pilate had a bag of gold, which was actually her father’s bones, he immediately decided to steal it from her. The most hateful is that, he indirectly killed Hagar, Pilate’s beloved granddaughter.

At the end of the novel, after Milkman found the root of his family, he finally became mature at the expense of the pains and sufferings of women around him. He began to confess all he had done to the women around him. Of his mother, Ruth and Pilate, he confessed, “From the beginning, his mother and Pilate had fought for his life, and he had never so much as made either of them a cup of tea.” Of his sisters, he confessed, “He had not said more than four consecutive sentences to them since he was in ninth grade.” Of Hagar, he confessed, “Hagar was dead and he had not loved her one bit.” Before Milkman helped Pilate bury her father’s bones, he went home to visit all his family with regret, bringing back a box of Hagar’s hair, together with the Joyce heels which Hagar wanted before her death. He tried to make up for all his past mistakes, so that he could release all his burdens and done with Guitar. However, no matter what he did, mistakes had been made. Hagar was already in heaven. The wound in his mother and sisters’ hearts would not heal. Pilate was also killed by Guitar because Milkman told Guitar she had gold. Milkman was forgiven, relaxed, remembered, and he finally mastered flying, but his path to become a legendary was built on the sacrifices of women. It was unfairness, torment and violence faced by women that made Milkman gain his spiritual mature, independence and self-discovery. The lament of women had never ceased, but Milkman didn’t hear it until the end.

4. Conclusion

The novel depicts black males’ stepping on their journeys to freedom, independence and self-discovery. They were flying, they were soaring, but female characters always play an indispensable role throughout the whole storyline. They stand behind the grand flying of men, crying, fighting, struggling, writing a moving and tragic song of women.

The lament of women in *Song of Solomon* should be always heard and memorized, but should no longer be sung today. Nowadays, an increasing number of women are coming out from the shadow of men, stepping out to make their voices heard. They are no longer the helpers behind men’s backs, watching and admiring their flying, but grow strong and colorful wings and fly high to the sky on their own. Hope that all women could be Pilate, who fought for her own rights and fought against patriarchy, instead of the pathetic Hagar, who belittled herself in order to be loved. Hope that all the women would no longer belong to accessories owned by males. Hope that all women could be brave, bright and beloved, equally possessing the freedom to be themselves and do whatever they want.

The women may soar.

And the children may know their names.

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