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## Construction of Identity in the Song of Solomon

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### Abstract

*This research paper is aimed at disentangling the breadcrumbs left by Toni Morrison (Chloe Anthony Wofford Morrison) Nobel prize winner, esteemed and celebrated American novelist of Song of Solomon, her third publication. Song of Solomon addresses the situation of the African American community and turns the light on discrepancies between black and white people. We hope to understand and decipher these clues/breadcrumbs by using the theory of identity construction. Identity construction has been a topic of great interest to many researchers. Artists of every field have always expressed themselves using vast techniques and metaphors which aim to paint a picture which goes many levels deeper than what appears to the naked eye, which is exactly the case with the Song of Solomon, from Milkman's need to fly to Pilate's lack of navel, are clues which are left for us to decipher and give an experience which is unique to the person reading. We aim to make that process a lot simpler and easy to understand using the concept of identity construction. This research paper is meant to understand the same story under different lenses and hence under different perspectives which lead to the subdivisions made below. We have divided the paper into three subsections of identity construction: character, Toni Morrison and the victims of racism.*

**Key words:** Transformation, Materialistic, Incestuous, Protagonist, Metaphorical

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### Introduction

The novel is about Macon "Milkman" Dead III and his journey from birth to adulthood where he yearns to fly. He is portrayed as a person who is devoid of all satisfaction in his present life and is searching for ways to liberate himself. The story starts by the death of Robert Smith who is attempting suicide, Milkman's family is present at the scene and the sight of Robert on the roof makes Milkman's mother go into labor and that is how Milkman is born, this sets the tone of the story and is a way of Morrison saying that something is about to happen. Milkman's mother Ruth has

been portrayed as a person who has issues on a molecular level and is her delusion that the only person who has loved her is her deceased father. Ruth combats her issues with life by doing meaningless and illogical things such as breastfeeding her son even though he is well over the age. This is how Macon Dead III gets the nickname Milkman. Now the main plot has two sides: One side revolves around the rumour of the gold found by two siblings Pilate and Macon Dead III. They found this gold after killing a white man who was responsible for the swindling incident with their father. Pilate convinces Macon Dead

II to leave the gold as they would be caught and punished for the killing of the white man which could be traced back to them from the gold. Pilate and Macon dead II have had opposite effects on Milkman's life. Macon dead II being an abusive husband and a self-centred father has a strained relationship with his son and he orders milkman to go steal the gold which they both found in that cave. Pilate on the other hand is depicted to be the person who is actually "flying" in the story, she is regarded as a person who liberated herself from the shackles of life and is living life on her own terms. She is the ideal which Milkman strives to be. The other side of the story is Milkman's devoid of interest in his life which he sets out to find in his journey to find the gold. Milkman's personality is highlighted when a conflict of interest is shown between guitar, his best friend and him. Guitar part of the seven days organisation seems to be against racism and has love for his fellow community, when it is born from anger and hatred. Milkman does not care less about the situation and hence shows how lost he is. These two sides are depicted in a very elaborate way with many relationships to Milkman and the truth of his great grandfather. There are numerous metaphors and biblical references such as Pilate's navel and the names of numerous characters. Milkman's is made aware of his personality and the truth as to why he is not flying. The story ends with an epic showdown where Pilate and milkman go to give a burial to Macon dead sr. where the guitar accidentally kills Pilate instead of milkman for the gold in the cave. Milkman and guitar duke it out and the issue is left there. The final statement which was hidden in those last words was that Milkman in a way learns to fly. The whole

plot is surgically examined by construction of identity through multiple perspectives.

## Literature review

Undoubtedly the Song of Solomon is one of the greatest works of Toni Morrison. The novel is set in a small African American community like all the Toni Morrison's stories. The story is filled with a variety of characters and different behaviours. This novel gained a lot of popularity worldwide which it deserves. The novel also focused on racial discrimination and is well packed with a good amount of poetry in it. The novel was written using advanced English and is not too easy for everyone to understand everything. Confusion is created at the first pages of the novel and is well cleared when the story progresses. This novel consists of golden truths which makes it especially recommended for youngsters

## Construction of Identity through Character

### Milkman:

Milkman is the son of Macon Dead, a wealthy black man. His given name at the time of birth was Macon Dead III, but he was given the nickname 'Milkman' when Freddie saw Ruth, Milkman's mother, breastfeeding his son at the age of four, far beyond the conventional time period of breastfeeding a child. In the first half of the novel 'Song of Solomon', Milkman is an immature young man without any purpose or ambition. Despite being the novel's protagonist, he is anything but a heroic figure. He is spiritually dead and blinded by materialism. He goes on a quest for his inheritance, but in the end, through a series of mishaps and coincidences, finds

himself on a spiritual quest for his identity.

Prior to his transformation later in the novel, Milkman is a selfish young man who lacks empathy for others. Although he takes pride in being nothing like his father, Milkman shares his father's materialistic values, arrogance, his indifferent, sexist and chauvinistic attitudes toward women. After being in a romantic relationship with his cousin Hagar for twelve years, he leaves her when he 'falls out of love'. Hagar is utterly heartbroken and tries to change her appearance and look more beautiful in attempts to win over Milkman's love, but all in vain. Ultimately, she ends up taking her own life.

He often feels burdened by his family's problems but lacks the courage to do anything about it. His father, Macon, encourages him to pursue business and money, but he wants to free himself from his father's influence and live a life as far away from him as possible. He protects Ruth, his mother, from Macon, until his father discloses his suspicion about Ruth having an incestuous relationship with her own father. This disgusts Milkman and taints his relationship with his mother. Milkman has an undersized leg, which makes him physically different from others. His schoolmates frequently teased and beat him for his physical disability. His ability to conceal his undersized leg leads him to believe that he can compensate for his emotional shortcomings.

The author has shown the reason behind Milkman's distorted and unusual personality. Generations of slavery and abuse have played a vital part in

developing Milkman's selfish personality. Milkman's immaturity is a result of the ensuing escape of his great-grandfather, Solomon, who left behind 21 children with his poor wife. The racism faced by his ancestors is also a reason for Milkman's selfishness. Milkman lost a sense of his identity at an incredibly young age. But deep down, he had a strong urge to connect with his true self. He looks up to Pilate for guidance, who has kept a close link with her ancestral past. When his materialistic self-sets out on a journey to find the Pilate's gold he heard about from his father, he learns more about his ancestors and his heritage. With the help of Pilate and Guitar, Milkman eventually discovers the secret of Solomon's song once he deciphers the vital link between the past and the future. His mission to find Pilate's gold yields a lot more than anticipated. He connects with his ancestral past and learns the origin of his name and finally connects with the black community—his "tribe".

### **Pilate Dead:**

Pilate Dead is the sister of Macon Dead and the daughter of Jake. Pilate represents a vital black tradition surviving in the urban industrial environment. She can be seen as an Earth Mother figure, who has always been aware and connected with her rustic and ancestral past. In fact, she is also a protagonist of the novel 'Song of Solomon' as she acts as the novel's moral guide. Pilate's presence is felt throughout the novel even though the author has rarely talked about what she is feeling or thinking. Born without a navel and alienated from others, she decided not to hide her oddity and just live life the way

she wanted to. She knew she did not want to fit in. She cut her hair short, wore men's shoes, and developed skills as a healer.

Ancestral heritage had great importance in her life. Pilate always wore an earring which had a snuff box containing her name written on a piece of paper, by her illiterate father. That was the only word he ever wrote. Even though she was a survivor of racism, she was completely incapable of cruelty. Her name can be seen as a homonym for "pilot" as she frequently guided anyone in need, like Milkman on this spiritual journey. She had a loving nature and an unselfish desire to care for others. Pilate gave up her wandering lifestyle to provide a stable home for her granddaughter, Hagar, and to watch over Ruth, who was "dying of lovelessness." Her love for others denoted strength. When a man assaulted her daughter Reba, Pilate pushed a knife in his chest close to his heart and threatened him never to touch Reba again. Even though Reba's abuser was a strong young man, Pilate prevailed.

Since Pilate exhibited both male and female characteristics, she was often associated with images of snakes and serpents. She was both Adam and Eve, both Christ and Satan. When Milkman first met her, she was seated with a posture that indicated that she embraced both Eastern and Western (African and American) traditions and values. Pilate is a true hero. Pilate wandered for twenty years and experienced a series of incidents that culminated in her character and enabled her to make hard choices concerning her role in society. From the moment she emerged from her mother's womb, she created herself. The midwife who witnessed her birth said that Pilate came out of her mother's womb herself. This

established her independence from the very beginning. She was a courageous woman who assumed full responsibility for her life.

The author suggests that Pilate's extraordinary qualities like her supernatural powers, great strength, lasting youthfulness, and boundless love come from African American cultural traditions. She recreated a past in which her ancestors are freed of oppression and live a free life. Her recreation of this past sustained the characters who live in the present. She freed Milkman from his spiritually dead existence and gave him a sense of purpose. As Milkman concluded his spiritual journey, he realised that Pilate had crafted her own metaphorical wings. Wings that let her to "fly" while remaining grounded.

### **Construction of identity through Toni Morrison**

The research article is prepared based on the novel "Song of Solomon" by Toni Morrison. The main aim of this article is to explore how beautifully the author constructed her identity in the novel. This article explains the situations where the author's identity is exposed in the novel and consists of a review based on the article and also reviews the way the author exposed her identity. In order to present his identity in the article, I will also touch the past works of Toni Morrison and compare identity construction in both. I will also discuss how milkman's life is altered in later stages. I will also discuss the misunderstandings among milkman and guitar which happened in the pursuit of gold. This article also consists of how milkman had a misconception about Pilate and then realized his mistake, which is all a part of Toni Morrison's style of writing.



This article covers each situation in the novel where there is a chance to expose the author's identity.

All the Toni Morrison works comprises the idea of past and ancestry as their primitive subject. These two concepts are highlighted in her novel "beloved" as well. There is a situation where milkman asks Macon for not using his real name. Macon replies with a smile that his mother liked the new one. This can be related to Toni Morrison's idea of the past. Milkman's mother wanted to have a fresh start and leave everything behind that has happened. This is the main reason behind not using his real name. It is an act of exposing her identity in the novel. When milkman was in search of gold milkman comes to know about his ancestors when he meets Circe on his way. This is also a proof to justify that the author exposed her identity. The idea of bringing the concept of paranormal power into the novel is also a part of Toni Morrison's style of writing. The birth of milkman in the novel is described as an unusual thing. It is mentioned that Pilate and her brother are haunted by the spirit of senior Macon dead. The words of senior Macon dead's spirit influenced Pilate to a major extent and results in leading a life by respecting and implementing his words. This is a part of the paranormal concept. Not only the birth of Milkman there are a good number of situations which are evident to show the paranormal behaviours of the characters in the novel. Milkman in the early days of his life used to very disturbed and boredom with his life he had no responsibility, and his family didn't attempt to change his behaviour and he never followed ruled and used to live by his own way his father treated him as a slave and he didn't have good relationship

with his family as days passed on he was in a relationship with Pilate's daughter Hagar and eventually broke up her, Hagar was severely disturbed with this act and also tried to kill him. Pilate was the most influential person in his life and because of her, he found some interest and got rid of his boredom nature. The author also exposed her identity at the end of the novel and where guitar wanted to kill milkman but unfortunately shoots Pilate and surprisingly here ends the novel. It is said to be the style of Toni Morrison. In her famous novel "beloved" appearance of spirit takes place throughout the story. The idea of myth is also displayed in the novel. It appears from the very beginning of the story with the death of Robert smith and lasts till the end. Myths are a part of Toni Morrison's identity which can be seen in most of her novels.

### Conclusion to this subsection

Construction of identity is different from person to person and few authors hide their identity and others expose them. The identity of Toni Morrison is very well packed in this book one can easily identify the author of this book by reading it. Construction of identity is nothing but presenting a particular set of concepts and style in every work, similarly many concepts and style in the novel matched her past works Milkman finally gets interest in his family and ancestors when he went in pursuit of gold. She has brought a drastic change in Milkman from the beginning to the end.

## Construction of identity through the people who are victims to racism

The United States of America was founded on the hope that all people were equal regardless of caste, creed and colour. Unfortunately, Black people who were abducted from their native continent and enslaved in USA experienced discrimination. For long, black people were treated as slaves. During the years of harsh slavery and poverty, they were cruelly treated by the white people. They were a guaranteed source of free slavery for decades. They were frequently whipped and beaten. So, the black people had to fight for their dignity and freedom. Many great leaders like Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. fought for the freedom of the black people. Later, black writers introduced a new weapon for their cause, literature. Through their works, these writers tried to restore black people's true identity and status in the world.

Toni Morrison, a prominent female black writer, tries to resolve this issue through her novel, *The Song of Solomon*. The main antagonist of the novel is Macon 'Milkman' Dead III. The novel follows his life from birth to adulthood. Morrison portrays Milkman as a young black who embarks on a quest to identify who he is in the society. Toni Morrison hopes that she could restore the whole history of her people in the United States of America through their cultural heritage and family unity.

## The Importance of Culture and History

The long years of slavery were painful and frightening to the Black people. In an alien

land, they were terrified by the White men and their cruelty. They soon understood that the only thing the white men expected of them was being good and humble slaves. From that time onwards, the white men abused the black people and falsified their history to make it appear as if they had no real history. This cast a gloomy depression on the black people's consciousness.

Soon, the black writers found that it was upon their shoulders to recover the destroyed history of their race. Tony Morrison does not stand aside from this general trend of the black writers. In fact, it is the main aim she wants to explore through her novels, the exploration of the history of slavery in the United States of America.

In the story, Milkman Dead III returns to Africa to escape the harsh conditions of poverty and slavery and to find out his true family history. Soon, he finds the connection between the origins of the Flying Africans to his great-grandfather, Solomon. Through fleeing to his native country, Milkman discovers his identity and regains selfhood.

## Forging a New Sense of Identity for the Black

When Blacks were taken from their native land to USA, their African names were removed along with their culture and history and they were given slave names by the white people. But soon, they removed their slave names to show their status as a free society.

In *the Song of Solomon*, slave names show the effects of both oppression and freedom. Before Milkman discovers his

grandfather's original name, Jake, he was known as Macon Dead, a badge of shame and slavery given to him by the white people. When Milkman finds out his grandfather's original name is Jake, he feels proud of himself and his family. The nickname 'Milkman' was itself a badge of shame to him. Soon, he identifies that if he wanted to achieve manhood, he must shed this badge and at last, he removes his name and feels true love for himself and his community.

### Family Reconciliation

In *the Song of Solomon*, the Dead family is most recognized through its division. Milkman's father, Macon Dead II leads one half while his aunt, Pilate Dead leads the other half. Their separation is the result of greed and jealousy. Later, Milkman acts as a bridge between the two parties and finally succeeds in uniting the two.

The decision of both siblings to unite over their rivalry causes Milkman to recover his dislocated family and his identity by understanding not only himself and his connection to his family but also his connection to the entire Black race. Family unity described in *The Song of Solomon* is also displayed in another Toni Morrison novel, *The Bluest Eye*. The black writers knew that restoring the history of the Black people played an integral role in constructing and restoring their true identity. So, they showed them through their novels that if the Black people wanted to achieve their goals, they had to redefine themselves and claim their history, family and identity.

### Conclusion to this subsection

In her writing, Toni Morrison endeavours to gain recognition for the black people's identity. In *the Song of Solomon*, she portrays Black characters that are cut off from their rich family history. The characters' past appeared as inauthentic and lost with no sense of honour. But when they recover their history and identity, they feel proud of themselves and their community. In *the Song of Solomon*, Macon 'Milkman' Dead III travels to escape slavery and in search of valuable gold but finds something more valuable, his identity and his rich past. In short, *The Song of Solomon* is an individual and social quest towards identifying and creating one's own identity.

### Unexpected findings

One tends to read this book two to three times not once and her use of identity construction does not stop at this book. Some findings in her book *Beloved* can also be used to understand the breadcrumbs left in this book. One tends to go in this book with the mindset of a book which sends a positive message of hope to victims of racism which it certainly does, but it also conveys a masterpiece of a story in the process. It conveys it is so that the story does not hinder the topic of racism but in general life, for example: Milkman's thirst to fly. One finds a certain satisfaction in reading the book two to three times and reading a different book each time with a different sense of lenses(perspective).

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