

Chapter IV

Reclaiming the Legacy: *Song of Solomon*

The paradoxical relationship that exists between an individual's awareness of what his/her position is in the society and what s/he is taught by social, political and cultural institutions about his/her identity, has been a matter of grave concern for socio-political researchers, historians, philosophers as well as for all intellectuals. It is the pedagogic institutions that teach one to ask questions of one's own identity, who s/he is, what is his/her status in the society, from where s/he has come, and these pedagogic institutions being the most powerful agents of the hegemonic ideologies, also provide for an inquisitive mind, the "suitable" criteria which must be considered while forming an opinion of oneself. The power of pedagogues to control definitions, to shape one's self identity and knowledge of his/her originality often can be misleading, because the resources, the raw materials of such kind of information are obtained from the officially recorded account of historical "truth" and thus the "pedagogic truth" may not have a real and fixed ground. Toni Morrison's desire to uncover the historical reality of the African-American past, to shape the identity of her people, fuels her fictional project of "literary archaeology" (Morrison, "The Site" 112). Though fiction

never equals facts, it reflects facts and it is "an interpretation and compilation of history, anthropology, sociology, psychology and a host of other areas" (Dance "Black Eve or Madonna?" 123). William Chafe noted very emphatically this point in *Women and Equality: Changing Pattern in American Culture*:

Despite the problems created by using a novel for purposes of historical analysis, the interior perspective that is offered outweighs the limitations of subjectiveness. . . . In the case of both women and blacks, novels provide a vividness of detail and personal experience necessary to understand the larger process at work in the society, but for the most part unavailable in conventional historical sources.

(59)

Barbara Smith, a black critic, also uses the same reasoning as Chafe. She writes, "untraditional methods might be the only way to proceed in a field where there is barely any published data to consult." But unlike Chafe, Smith adds, "books by black women authors are the richest written source [of information on black womanhood] because in the creation of the work, we can assume that little has stood between the black woman and the telling of her story" ("Doing Research on Black American Women" 4). Thus black

women's inherited gift of telling their stories so as to call attention to the distinctiveness of their experience, as blacks and also as women, acquires a vital significance in a culture that has always looked for a unifying language to express its national mind and ethos. The black women writers, in their insistence on the exploration of a legacy by their way of reinterpreting the excavated materials, by revising and by re-examining the important issues regarding their situation in American society and culture, have attested their claim for a reclamatory project. They believe strongly that the search for the legacy of their forefathers/foremothers will authenticate their identities and create a strong bond between past and present. They say that it is their responsibility to build a heritage to be passed on to new generations. In her interview with Christina Davis Morrison said about the serious responsibility of reclaiming the history of black people:

. . . the reclamation of the history of black people in this country is paramount in its importance because while you can't really blame the conqueror for writing history his own way, you can certainly debate it. . . the heartbeat of black people has been systematically annihilated in many, many ways and the job of recovery is ours. It's a serious responsibility

and one single human being can only do a very very tiny part of that, but it seems to me both secular and non-secular work for a writer. (224-225)

The reclamatory project of Morrison is not to document the details of African American past or to retreat to ancient African myths of the "far and misty past," (Morrison, "Behind" 87) but to "reconstruct the world" and "yield up a kind of truth" (Morrison, "The Site" 110, 112) by decoding a unifying language and seeing through it the connection that would help her to solidify the identity of her people, strongly related to their "root."

In *Song of Solomon* Morrison's project works through a slow process of dismantling the hero's superficially imposed cultural construction by initiating him into the knowledge of his ancestry so that he can acquire the "discredited knowledge" of African American history (Morrison, "Rootedness" 342). Morrison has described *Song of Solomon* as "a journey from stupidity to epiphany, of a man, a complete man" ("The Site" 124). Milkman, the protagonist of the novel, in quest of his familial history, is caught in an enigmatic situation that becomes very complicated when he is supplied with stories, which, as told by different characters, puzzle him. He is engaged in putting together bits and pieces of those fragmented and

incomplete stories and in de/reconstructing the given information. All his queries and inquisitiveness converge toward Pilate, his "outlawed" aunt. In this novel the legacy is of the voices to be listened to, each with his/her own perception of truth. And Morrison, with her art of storytelling, fills up the gap between the telling and what is being told. By assigning her narrative to many voices, Morrison acknowledges her debt to the oral tradition, which is the true legacy of black people. The stories in *Song of Solomon* are about names and misnames, birth and death which bear witness to the past. Names are an essential part of the legacy and names have stories, which must be kept alive for the survival of black people's culture.

The novel begins with Mr. Smith, an insurance agent's attempted flight across Lake Superior from Mercy Hospital's cupola. What is noteworthy about the narrative of this attempted flight is that Morrison establishes the network of history and culture within which Smith's flight takes place. By comparing the crowd, drawn by "Lindbergh . . . four years earlier," (3) to the small crowd which witness now Mr. Smith's flight, Morrison is evoking the history of American aviation. This comparison is a rhetorical device to differentiate between the circumstances--one motivating the heroic expression of creativity and ingenuity; the

other an escape from racial injustice. Mr. Smith's flight takes place in "Not Doctor Street," a street, the post office does not recognize. Originally the street was popular as "Doctor Street," named after the coloured doctor who had lived there since 1896 till his death. The name acquired a "quasi official status" in 1918 when coloured men were being drafted. But it did not exist for a long time because some of the city legislators' careful concern for appropriate names and maintenance of the city's landmarks became "the principal part of their political life":

And since they knew that only southside residents kept it up, they had notices posted in the stores, barbershops, and restaurants in that part of the city saying that the avenue running northerly and southerly from Shore Road. . . had always been and would always be known as Main's Avenue and not Doctor street.

It was a genuinely clarifying public notice because it gave Southside residents a way to keep the memories alive and please the city legislators as well. (4)

The city's registered name "Mains Avenue" can hardly scrape off its previous name from the memory of people, not only the name of the streets, but that of a family with its

stories. The family name of Milkman, "Dead," is an acquired name from whites. This heavy name "Dead" passes down generations as a consequence of a drunken white official's carelessness, a "literal slip of the pen" (18) that was handed to Macon Dead's father on a piece of paper. Macon narrates to his son Milkman how their family name got messed up, when his father, an illiterate black had gone to register his name with Freedmen's Bureau:

Papa was in his teens and went to sign up, but the man behind the desk was drunk. He asked Papa where he was born. Papa said Macon. Then he asked him who his father was, Papa said, 'He's dead.' Asked him who owned him, Papa said, 'I'm free'. Well, the Yankee wrote it all down, but in the wrong spaces. Had him born in Dunfrie, wherever the hell that is, and in the space for his name the fool wrote, 'Dead' comma 'Macon.'

(53)

The configuration of the naming of Pilate, Macon's sister, took place by the fancy of an illiterate father who ". . . had thumbed through the Bible, and since he could not read a word, chose a group of letters that seemed to him strong and handsome; saw in them a large figure that looked like a tree hanging in some princely but protective way over

a row of smaller trees" (18). Even the name of the hero, "Milkman," itself is an outcome of a joke which was formed because Milkman was a suckling boy of his mamma till quite his old age. Thus people and places acquire their names from ". . . yearnings, gestures, flaws, events, mistakes, weaknesses. Names that bore witness" (330). These names are the clues to the legacy, to the origin of one's ancestry. The narrative voice says, "Under the recorded names were other names, just as 'Macon Dead,' recorded for all time in some dusty file, hid from view the real names of people, places, and things. Names that had meaning" (329). Morrison has engaged her hero with the task of finding out his "root," which is not only his own but also of his family, his community and his people. The rediscovery of the history of Milkman's ancestors not only retrieves the obliterated facts, but also metaphorically kindles the protagonist to reread and reinterpret the world with a growing sense of awareness. Thus the hero understands well the meaning of blackness which contributes to the richness of his cultural heritage.

Milkman grew up in an atmosphere of hostility and turmoil, and also of a cultural discontinuity created by mass migration of black people from South to urban North. Macon Dead moved north to Michigan after the white people had killed his father for occupying their farm, "Lincoln's

Heaven," a name given by his father. There he became rich, a "propertied Negro" (20) by renting houses to poor blacks and evicting them into streets when they failed to pay. By Clutching keys "to all the doors of his houses and fondling them from time to time, Macon derives a kind of self-satisfaction from their bunchy solidity" (17). In his acquisitive urge, Macon gradually loses the key to his spiritual being. This materialistic craze of the father is transmitted to the son: "Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too" (55). Referring to the attitudes of blacks in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Morrison says:

In the legitimate and necessary drive for better jobs and housing, we abandoned the past and a lot of the truth and sustenance that went with it. . . . In trying to cure the cancer of slavery and its consequences, some healthy as well as malignant cells were destroyed. . . . The point is not to soak in some warm bath of nostalgia about the good old days--there were none!--but to recognize and rescue those qualities of resistance, excellence and integrity that were so much a part of our past and so useful to us and to the generations of blacks now growing up. For larger and larger

numbers of black people, this sense of loss has grown, and the deeper the conviction that something valuable is slipping away from us, the more necessary it has become to find some way to hold on to the useful past without blocking off the possibilities of the future.

("Rediscovering Black History" 14)

In excavating the riches of the past, Morrison has shown her great confidence in the power of black woman, Pilate in the present novel, who is a perfect person to carry on the responsibility of a "culture bearer." Although the protagonist is male, the novel reassesses the legacy of forefathers from Pilate's--a daughter's perspective. Before the journey of Milkman takes place in part 2 of the novel Morrison places her hero in a world which seems to provide a sense of cultural alienation and internal dislocation. Macon Dead's pursuit of wealth and power for keeping up his status as a classy Negro, Ruth's burial of her father at "some place other than the one where Negroes were all laid together" (123) because he had contempt for the blacks, the Dead daughters' empty, lady-like lifestyles, an all pervading note of blinding suspicion and hatred that substitute for human warmth--all these betray an attitude of a family which is dead itself because it has come far away from its rich cultural heritage and imbibed

the status consciousness of urban middle class. Milkman's life is surrounded by death wishes: his father wanted Ruth to abort the child when he was in his mother's womb; Hagar, his lover, wants to kill him; Guitar, his only friend, is after him because his day has come. Milkman himself now surrenders himself to death wish. The narrative voice describes:

Gradually his fear of and eagerness for death returned. 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 about the world was what other people had told him. He felt like a garbage pail for the actions and hatreds of other people. (120)

Pilate comes and saves him from his damnation. With her sense of respect for the legacy, she becomes Milkman's pilot, the pedagogue who teaches him the mysteries of life and death and initiates him into the search for his ancestry. To Macon, Pilate is now the most contemptuous woman, though once she had been his "dearest thing in the world." Macon trembles by thinking what the white men, who help him to run his business by providing for him bank loans, will think of him if they come to know that the "raggedy bootlegger was his sister," who has a daughter but no husband and the daughter has also a daughter but no

husband (20). His obsession with riches and social status has actually made him blind and so he cannot penetrate the surface of Pilate's life to look into its life-saving depths. She is a model of inner strength and self determination, in opposition with the definition of power that Macon teaches Milkman.

Pilate was born "unnatural" from a dead woman's body, without a navel. When she realizes ". . . what her situation in the world was and would probably always be she threw away every assumption she had learned and began at zero." In her utter loneliness she reflects, "When I am happy and when am I sad and what is the difference? What do I need to know to stay alive?" She opens a wine house, cuts her hair and dresses outrageously; but "her respect for others' privacy" and "her deep concern for and about human relationships" (149) make her unique in all her eccentricities. In her interview with Bessie W. Jones and Audrey Vinson, Morrison said:

She came without a navel. . . . It made her an outsider in a way and invent herself in a way, which accounted for her eccentricity, but also it made it possible for the whole concept of the combination of that which is real and that which is surreal to work hand in hand. . . . But Pilate is a loving, caring woman, nevertheless. And she

is so clear about herself. She has total response and total trust of her own instincts. And once I found the way that she could become and stay in this world, then she was unlike every body. (184-185)

Her "unusualness"--that seems to be a combination of both "real" and "surreal" including her many gifts as natural healer, sooth-sayer, skilled wine maker, singer, conjuror--in fact attests to the legacy of black womanhood. It was Guitar who first took Milkman to Pilate and on the very first day he was spell bound: "Her voice made Milkman think of pebbles. Little round pebbles that bumped up against each other. . . . The pebbly voice, the sun, and the narcotic wine smell weakened both the boys, and they sat in a pleasant semi-stupor, listening to her go on and on" (40). It is on the very first day that Pilate taught him the lesson of "blackness": "You think dark is just one color, but it ain't. There're five or six kinds of black. Some silky, some wooly. Some just empty. Some like fingers. And it don't stay still. It moves and changes from one kind of black to another" (40-41). Milkman then learns the properties of blackness, which is shifting, multiple, sensual and spiritual. Thus in the wine house of the lady who "looked like a tall black tree," amid the pervading "odor of pine and fermenting fruit" (39)

Milkman is reborn. Her hearkening back to her dead father's words, the bones she has put carefully in the green sack, which she considers her "inheritance" and her name, her earring, which is made out of her mother's brass box, her habit of picking up a rock from every place--all are signs of her deep connectedness. Thus Pilate, the symbol of both freedom and rootedness, serves as a spiritual guide for Milkman.

The novel's epigraph, "The father may soar,/And the children may know their names"--being very suggestive of freedom (soaring) and rootedness (names)--offers a clue for Milkman's reawakening from innocence to experience, from his ignorance of origins, heritage, identity and communal responsibility to knowledge and acceptance. Milkman must learn two things: the art of flying and finding/known names. By going through the regenerative process of self-discovery, Milkman can commit himself to the needs of his community. Pilate, his aunt, exemplifies the combination of both self-recreation and responsibility, which Milkman realizes at her death: "Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly" (336). Though Milkman initially starts his journey to find out gold, buried beneath a white man whom his father had killed, later this journey transforms into a spiritual quest for his ancestral past, which in turn teaches him the lesson of resistance to succumbing

helplessly to a kind of "rootless consciousness" (Jung 157). It is Pilate, who guides him along: "Milkman followed in her tracks" (258).

The two stages of Milkman's journey--Danville, Pennsylvania, and then Shalimar, Virginia--symbolize the rites of passage that purify and also initiate him back into his "origin." As he moves from place to place, he recovers a significant part of his ancestor's history. When he is acknowledged as one of the tribes by the southerners who knew his ancestors, Milkman readily recognizes the meaning of kinship. He feels proud of coming to know about his grandfather's agricultural skills and personal integrity: "It was a good feeling to come into a strange town and find a stranger who knew your people. All his life he'd heard the tremor in the word. 'I live here, but my people. . .'" (229). From Danville he goes to a place called Charlemagne, pronounced "Shalleemone" and evoking the name of "Solomon," who later is identified as "Sugarman" in Pilate's song. Gradually Milkman recovers a significant portion of his family history. He identifies his grandmother's family name "Byrd" as "Bird," a sign of Indian ancestry. Milkman also discovers that the "Jake" in the children's song (the song begins with "Jake the only son of Solomon") is the original name of his grandfather whom the Yankee officer misnamed as Macon Dead. Thus he

deciphers from the song of the children the history of his ancestry; that Jake is the only son ("Twenty-one children, the last one Jake!") his great grandfather had left and that "Jake's father was Solomon" (304). Thus Milkman discovers the original names of his ancestors buried beneath the acquired name "Dead" that has been recorded in the white agent's register book. In this process Milkman learns how to find out real "gold" in the cave of obliterated facts, stories and gossips. By learning to hear in a different way in order to grasp the contextualized meaning of a speech, by decoding the unified language and by discovering new phonetic associations and words that link up with other words and phrases, suddenly Milkman realizes that his grandfather's command to Pilate, "Sing" is in fact his grandmother's name. Jake's other message to Pilate 'You just can't fly on off and leave a body" (208)--is misunderstood by Pilate because it is not an order to retrieve the body of the white man, but an appeal of a father to a daughter to have a proper burial, as can be noted in the conversation between Milkman and Pilate.

"That was your father you found. You've been carrying your father's bones--all this time."

"Papa?" she whispered.

"Yes. And, Pilate, you have to bury him. He wants you to bury him. Back where he belongs. On Solomon's Leap."

"Papa?" she asked again (333).

The most significant experience of Milkman occurs during the night hunt in Shalimar when he goes through a process of retracing language back to its sources. In the darkness of night, Milkman learns to read in the tradition of his ancestors. He also learns how the dogs and men communicate with each other: "All those shrieks, those rapid tumbling barks, the long sustained yells, the tuba sounds, the drumbeat sounds. . . . It was all language. . . . No, it was not language; it was what there was before language. Before things were written down" (278). The last stage of his quest, the moments of revelation are like new baptism: as when in the heart of nature he walks the earth "like his legs were stalks" (281), or when he watches the skinning of a bobcat which is evocative of all the physical horror of lynching, castration and mutilation that a black man has to suffer, or again when he surrenders himself into the hands of an unknown woman, called Sweet.

Central to Morrison's reclamatory project is the forging of Milkman's identification with the historically shaped meaning of blackness. Having gone through the long journey in the land of his ancestors and experiencing life

totally different from his father's Milkman sheds off the shell of his previous existence: "his self--the cocoon that was 'personality'--gave way" (277). In Shalimar, his home town, Milkman, the "city Negro," a black man in the white America, by going through his trials and tribulations, finally achieves what DuBois calls "self-conscious manhood." The "double consciousness" of Milkman, the "two-ness"--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts; two unreconciled strivings, "two warring ideals in one dark body"--gets merged "into a better and truer self." Morrison teaches her middle class audience through Milkman's revelatory project that one should not bleach his/her Negro soul "in the flood of white Americanism" (Bois *The Souls of Black Folk* 45). As Arnold Rampersad comments on Du Bois's conception of "double consciousness," "[a]nother way of seeing these two souls surely is as a contest between memory and its opposite, amnesia. American culture demands of its blacks amnesia concerning slavery and Africa, just as it encourages amnesia of a different kind in whites" ("Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*" 118). In fact, the novel reinterprets the concept by recovering the black subject: as in white America blacks need a double consciousness, whites too need their own to acknowledge the rightful position of blacks.

In her desire to "find and expose a truth about the interior life" of her people and to "fill in the blanks that the slave narratives left" (Morrison, "The Site" 113) Morrison offers her new representation of her peoples' history, particularly that of the black women, in order to reveal their traditional qualities like strength, resistance and integrity, the unique cultural values that they have developed in spite of and often because of their oppression. In her interview with Thomas LeClair Morrison says, ". . . my people, we "peasants," have come to the city, that is to say, we live with its values. There is a confrontation between old values of the tribes and new urban values. It's confusing" (121). Because she began writing in the 1960s, she was greatly influenced by the turbulence and uneasiness about the loss of roots, caused by the mass migration of black people. In resisting a havoc change of her people by affirming their cultural heritage and customs with its rich sources in language and stories, Morrison wants to play the role of a "cultural archivist" (*Mobley Folk Roots and Mythic Wings* 7). As an African American novelist within the American literary tradition, Morrison deals with the individuals lives of a marginalized group within a basically European cultural matrix. It is partly true that public identity is the product of nationalism which links a people dispersed by

difference and very often subsumes a common ethnic past. It is by imitating the model of an ideal whiteness that the blacks in America construct(ed) for themselves a "naturalized/nationalized" identity. While the white identified individualism of Morrison's male and female bourgeois characters is located within social relations of power and desire, narrative effect is usually on the side of those who are subordinated to bourgeois power.

Morrison's reclamatory project, which aims at uncovering the historical reality of the African American past, registers the legacy of forefathers from a daughter's perspective in her third novel *Song of Solomon*. The novel is centred on a family quarrel that is not just between a brother (Macon) and a sister (Pilate) but between the northern black mobility and the jettisoned southern past. It is Pilate who guides Milkman to initiate into the knowledge of the world of Black people, the way they look at the world. Morrison's project works slowly by unmasking the hero's systematized knowledge, imposed by his wealth-crazy father, who is an agent of the dominant culture and by making him realize the "true" wealth of Black cosmology. In "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" Morrison has told of the novel's blending of the "supernatural" with a "profound rootedness in the real world" in such a manner that neither can take "precedence

over the other." "It is indicative of the cosmology," continues Morrison, "the way in which Black people looked at the world" (342). In her attempt to excavate the cultural wealth of black people Morrison depends on the power of her fictional representation. Pilate, as Morrison says, is the representative of a "sort of timeless people, whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom" (343). While rewriting the history of black women, Morrison foregrounds the blues tradition that Macon has left behind and Pilate has kept up. Michael Roth observes,

Writing the past is one of the crucial vehicles for reconstructing or reimagining a community's connections to its traditions. This is especially true for groups who have been excluded from the mainstream national histories that have dominated Western historiography, and who have suffered a weakening of group memory as part of their experience of modernity. (10)

About the cultural dislocation Morrison notes, "For a long time, the art form that was healing for Black people was music. That music is no longer exclusively ours; we don't have exclusive rights to it. Other people sing it and play it; it is the mode of contemporary music everywhere"

("Rootedness" 340). The blues constitute the black sociohistorical matrix in *Song of Solomon*. Morrison's invocation of black music is an urgent need for recovering their cultural heritage, which under the pressure of the dominant culture is disappearing fast. LeRoi Jones wrote that in the face of "the persistent calls to oblivion made by the mainstream of the society" (131) blues constitute, "the peculiar social, cultural, economic, and emotional experience of a black man in America" (147). The middle class black people have drifted away from the blues tradition in their blind imitation of the dominant cultural icons. Morrison interprets such freedom as cultural deprivation, which is vividly presented in the novel in a scene of nostalgic harkening when Macon stands hidden outside his sister's home, watching and listening to Pilate who sings blues with her daughter and granddaughter. The narrator describes the hypnotized effect of blues on Macon:

They were singing some melody that Pilate was leading. A phrase that the other two were taking up and building on. Her powerful contralto, Reba's piercing soprano in counterpoint, and the soft voice of the girl, Hagar, who must be about ten or eleven now, pulled him like a carpet tack under the influence of a magnet. (29)

His widening distance from the "spiritually sustaining world" (Grewal 69) of his sister's home is the metaphorical suggestion of cultural alienation of a middle class bourgeois personality. Milkman's initiation into blues becomes the most essential requirement for his identification with the reconstructed meaning of blackness, for making him aware of a collective black consciousness and of its spiritual force. Angela Davis points out that in the post-slavery years African American musicians would impart through music "a collective consciousness and a very specific communal yearning for freedom" ("Black Women and Music" 10)

While reconstructing the history of black women, Morrison projects "the centuries long hysterical blindness to feminist discourse" (*Playing* 14) but Morrison's feminism partakes of the black cultural resistance to white feminism. The histories of black and white women are different, and therefore they have different agendas. The feminist point of view in her novel is always contextual and relational, articulated with respect to class and community. The stark realities of black women's lives, their lack of control over their own lives (Pilate being an exception), form the subtext of *Song of Solomon*. Macon's obsession with money and status affect his relationship with his wife and daughters. The gospel

"owning things" has taken him far away from the people who are within his reach. Paula Webster and Lucy Gilbert have examined in *Bound by Love: The Sweet trap of Daughterhood* the process that socializes women to accept victimization. They say that gender is a product of human thought and culture, a social construction that makes biological males and females internalize a pattern of behaviour: "Relatively powerless and considered inferior to men, all female infants enter a world that devalues and mystifies femininity" (3). Milkman, in his self-centred attitude and insensitiveness to others, thinks that he is a supreme one who rightly deserves all female homage. The women in his house clean up his messes, cook for him, and gently shape their lives around his needs. He takes all this for granted and never shows them any consideration. Lena says him in rage:

You've been laughing at us all your life. . . .
 Using us, ordering us, and judging us. . . .
 Our girlhood was spent like a found nickel on
 you. When you slept, we were quiet; when you
 were hungry, we cooked; when you wanted to play,
 we entertained you; and when you got grown enough
 to know the difference between a woman and a two-
 toned Ford, every thing in the house stopped for

you. . . . Where do you get the right to decide our lives?

She challenges the very power of Milkman because she knows where it comes from:

I'll tell you where. From that hog's gut that hangs down between your legs. Well, let me tell you something, baby brother: you will need more than that. I don't know where will you get it or who will give it to you, but mark my words, you will need more than that. (215)

Milkman shabbily treats Hagar, too. She gave him all of her love, unconditionally and absolutely, but Milkman took her only for his own gratification and "after more than a dozen years, he was getting tired of her" (91).

The narrative art of the novel belongs to the oral tradition, "one specific to Gullah slaves of coastal Georgia and South Carolina" (Grewal 65). Morrison appropriates several folk tales and myths, biblical stories and Greek epics in order to capture the reader's imagination and to enliven the dead memories which would help her interpret in her own terms the legacy of her people, particularly that of the black women. If the African ancestor's flight is an indicative of liberty, the power and wonder in the flight is also undercut by the question Sweet asks Milkman, "Who'd he leave behind?"

(332). It is a reminder of the burdens black women have to carry on alone because men, preoccupied with their own escape, would not shoulder them. Only at the end of his quest for self-knowledge Milkman can solve the riddle hidden within the song. He listens attentively to the children's song in Shalimar, the blues that often Pilate sang. Only they substitute "Solomon" for "Sugarman." Now only Milkman realizes that they are singing about his grandfather Jake, the son of the flying African Solomon, who left behind twenty-one children including his wife Ryna. The sobbing echo, emanating from Ryna's Gulch, that Milkman had listened to during his hunting expedition accompanies the song. Thus Morrison, in inscribing the flying myth, also offers a stinging criticism of the male paradigm of heroism. But the story in the song, with its touching melody, is an education for Milkman. Once initiated, he does not hear it as a nursery rhyme but as "that old blues song Pilate sang all the time." In remembering Pilate he begins to make another connection beyond himself. The author describes, "As Milkman watched the children, he began to feel uncomfortable. Hating his parents, his sisters seemed silly now. And the skim of shame that he had rinsed away in the bathwater after having stolen from Pilate returned. But now it was as thick and as tight as a caul" (300).

Thus Milkman's tutelage under Aunt Pilate turns him toward the past and redefines his values. At her death bed when Pilate requests him "to sing a little something" for her, Milkman gives her back her own:

Sugargirl don't leave me here

Cotton balls to choke me

Sugargirl don't leave me here

Buckra's arms to yoke me.

Being matured at last, Milkman understands the positive meaning of ancestral flight: "'You just can't fly on off and leave a body'" (332) and he realizes "why he loved her so. Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly." He whispered to her, "There must be another one like you. . . . There's got to be at least one more woman like you" (336). Pilate's lesson thus enlightens Milkman who now accepts responsibility for his past and himself in reaches out in love to others. At the end of the novel Morrison stresses Milkman's ability to fly as a fleet and a bright "lodestar," indicating his newly gained knowledge of leading and sustaining the sky. By reinscribing the past through stories, words and songs her novel *Song of Solomon* has made a beautiful statement on the survival of a legacy as well as on the legacy of a survival. The legacy endures through collective memories that keep alive all rituals from birth to death. It is the spiritual wisdom

of black women which keeps the legacy up in the ever-changing world.