



## What Is ‘Home’? The Meaning and Function of ‘Home’ in Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*

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### **Abstract**

*This paper explores the motif of ‘home’ in Toni Morrison’s novel *Song of Solomon*. Although home is a prominent and recurrent motif in many of Morrison’s works, this paper focuses explicitly on *Song of Solomon*. In *Song of Solomon* ‘home’ is more than a piece of geography. Instead, it is a space that is situated in race, a space where race and racial history matters, albeit in a positive and empowering way for the Black community. Such a home lives in the memories of people, and it is kept alive through the oral songs and stories that are handed down across generations of Black Americans. Home is also a space that provides protection from trauma and helps in the healing of the individual. This healing can take place through reconnection with the root or through a reignited sense of belongingness to the community. The sense of belongingness is strong in home, and that helps individuals within the community to shape a formidable sense of identity and a sense of self. Home is enriched by the presence of ancestors, who are the bearers of tradition and who act as the binding force within the community that pulls everything and everyone together into one coherent structure of relationships. But most importantly, home is what Milkman finds at the end of his journey from Northern to Southern America. In addition, once he finds it, he heals and transforms himself to prepare for a future that is more harmonious with his past.*

**Keywords:** *Home, ancestor, race, trauma, memory, history, healing*

### **Introduction**

This article explores the motif of ‘home’ in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*. ‘Home’ is a recurrent motif across her multiple works. Many of her characters are shaped by their homes, and understanding these characters in terms of the relationship they have

with their homes opens up novel perspectives for understanding these characters and their experiences. For example, in *The Bluest Eye* Cholly left home when he was quite young; Macon Dead in *Song of Solomon* ran away from his home after his father was shot dead; Milkman in *Song of Solomon* fails to feel at home at his birthplace, and he is always searching for a home. Similarly, in her novel *Sula*, the protagonist Sula feels that she returns home when she returns to Bottom valley. Given such a prominent presence of home in Morrison's novels, it is worthwhile to make an inquiry into the idea that 'home' signifies and analyze the function it performs in Morrison's works. This study addresses the following questions about the meaning and function of home with a specific focus on Morrison's one work *Song of Solomon*: what does 'home' signify for Milkman in *Song of Solomon*? What does it mean for him to be alienated from 'home' and to finally find one? Additionally, how does understanding Milkman's relationship with 'home' help us understand the general experience of Black Americans as a race-situated group in American history?

### **The Idea of 'Home'**

'Home' can simply be understood as a geographical space with which a person might forge myriads of relations over time. This idea of 'home' as a geographical space is evoked in *Song of Solomon* too, and it is communicated to the readers through the character of Macon Dead I early in the book, when he says:

We live here. On this planet, in this nation, in this country right here. Nowhere else! We got a home in this rock, don't you see! ... Grab it. Grab this land! Take it, hold it, my brothers, make it, my brothers, shake it, squeeze it, turn it, twist it, beat it, kick it, kiss it, whip it, stomp it, dig it, plow it, seed it, reap it, rent it, buy it, sell it, own it, build it, multiply it, and pass it on – can you hear me? Pass it on! (231)

Here, through the character of Macon Dead I, Morrison is exploring the idea of home as a piece of earth that one can work with and mold accordingly. She is also invoking the idea of home as something that one can pass on as a legacy to future generations. But the idea of home does not end with a piece of land in this novel. As the plot progresses, readers unravel multiple layers of the meanings that this motif 'home' invokes within the story. What is of significance is that these ideas resonate with the larger history and historical experiences of African Americans. In this sense, she has done a commendable job in exploring these history and experiences through her characters, settings, and plot in the novel.

'Home' means much more than a piece of land in *Song of Solomon*. As the plot progresses, it achieves a metaphorical status in *Song of Solomon* and signifies more than just a geographical space. Morrison's 'home' in *Song of Solomon* is both a spatial and

temporal space that carries the history of racial trauma in it. It is also a healing space that enables the characters to cope with such trauma. It is what serves a sense of connection, identity and pride for its dwellers. More importantly, it functions as an abode of ancestors, and everything virtuous that is alive with a living ancestor. The following paragraphs explore and expand on each of these meaning and function of home through the story of Milkman and his journey in the quest of a 'home' in *Song of Solomon*.

### **A Race-Situated 'Home'**

In her article 'Home', Morrison conceptualizes an idea of a home that is "race-specific" (2). This idea of home is not a house where "race-does-not-matter" (3). Instead, for her 'home' is what embraces race and everything good and bad associated with the race. It contains the memory of alienation, trauma, separation, and migration that Black American's had to go through historically. It is a home that is situated in race in the sense that it is infused with the history of racism and slavery. However, it is also a space where one feels free and at peace. It is also a space where Milkman can find his identity without having to wipe off his racial past and origin.

The 'home' that Morrison invokes in *Song of Solomon* is also an all-encompassing, all-embracing one. Milkman finds it in the villages in the Southern America. The villages in Virginia, both Shalimar and Danville, are situated in race. They constantly ooze out histories of trauma, alienation and separation, and this history is kept alive through oral tradition that lives in folk songs and stories. He realizes this when he starts meeting people in the villages of Shalimar and Danville and hearing stories of his ancestors and their bitter experiences with slavery. What amazes him the most is that these stories live in the form of oral songs and narratives. Although Milkman gets to listen many of these songs only after he arrives in Virginia, he has some faint memory of listening to these songs from his aunt Pilate's mouth back in the North as well.

The 'Song of Solomon' from which the novel gets its title is one of such songs. This song tells the painful story of slavery as well as of a brave attempt to overcome it by a Black American. The stories Milkman hears in Danville about his grandfather are another example of a story that carries and conveys the history of racial trauma. Once Milkman learns that story he feels closer to his history and his grandfather although he has never met him. In "Trauma, Memory, and Subjectivity: The Healing Power of 'Home,'" Schreiber describes how Black stories and songs that have been passed down orally from one generation to another keep the idea of 'home' alive for Black Americans. Milkman has been carrying his racial history for a long time even though he was unaware of it. But once he finds 'home' in the songs and stories in Virginia, Milkman feels ready to accept himself, his family, and their history with all the pain, flaws and imperfections associated with them.

It is important to note that Milkman not just accepts that history but also actively participates in creating one. In one of the scenes where he listens to the 'Song of Solomon', Morrison highlights the glorious moment of his participation in that history:

Milkman pulled out his wallet and pulled from it his airplane ticket stub, but he had no pencil to write with, and his pen was in his suit. He would just have to listen and memorize it. He closed his eyes and concentrated while the children, inexhaustible in their willingness to repeat a rhythmic, rhyming action game, performed the round over and over again. And Milkman memorized all of what they sang. (*Song of Solomon* 303)

The above description highlights Milkman's moment of learning to rely on memory. As soon as he learns to fall back on his memory, he participates in the historically Black American's way of preserving their stories through the means of memory. When Black Americans were slaves and had no access to formal education or other system of recording their experiences, memory and oral tradition were the only tools available to them to accomplish this task. It is therefore that the history of Black Americans is essentially an oral history that is kept alive in memories through songs and stories and is passed down orally across generations.

Schreiber too highlights upon the importance of memory in creation and continuation of a 'home' that lives in history. He describes home as "a place or a concept, retrieved through memory" (1). By listening to these songs and stories and by memorizing them, Milkman is retrieving a home as well as keeping it alive in his memory for passing it on to further generations. Pilate has done that for a long time, and Milkman has heard her humming those songs back in the North as well. But Milkman is doing that for the first time in Virginia. For Schreiber this 'home', which is retrieved through memory, is intricately connected to the history of trauma. But the same 'home', despite being connected to the memory of trauma, is also the one that "provides protection from trauma" (Schreiber 1). He emphasizes that home is a space which protects one's sense of "self" from the damaging impact of these trauma. In this sense, 'home' becomes a healing space.

### **'Home' as a Healing Space**

The function of 'home' as a healing space is prominent in *Song of Solomon*. For Milkman, the South – Virginia in particular – functions as a healing space where he feels a sense of protection, ease and comfort that he missed throughout his life while living in the North. In the first part of the novel where he is still living in his father's house in the North, Milkman is constantly haunted by a nagging sense of lack. Morrison makes this sense of lack explicit through her description of a young Milkman:

Milkman stood before his mirror and glanced, in low light of the wall lamp, at his reflection. He was as usual, unimpressed with what he saw. He had a fine enough face. Eyes women complimented him on, a firm jaw line, splendid teeth. Taken apart, it looked all right. Even better than all right. But it lacked coherence, a coming together of the features into a total self. It was all very tentative, the way he looked, like a man peeping around a corner of someplace he is not supposed to be, trying to make up his mind whether to go forward or to turn back. (*Song of Solomon* 69)

Readers can contrast such self-perception of Milkman as “lacking coherence” with his perception of himself in Virginia after undergoing a positive transformation. To describe this transformation, Morrison writes, “He ran back to Solomon’s store and caught a glimpse of himself in the plate-glass window. He was grinning. His eyes were shining. He was as eager and happy as he had ever been in his life” (*Song of Solomon* 302). This transformation of Milkman from ‘lacking coherence’ to happy and grinning is achieved after his visit to his home where he is introduced to his ancestors’ stories. After this transformation, Milkman feels lighter in his body and wants to fly high. He readily sheds off the material layers of his identity that he had accumulated when he was in the North. Morrison elucidates this metaphorically by describing how Milkman gets rid of his rich clothes, shoes and watch during his expedition in Virginia with the local folks there. After shedding off the burden of those material possessions, he feels ready to fly high and start fresh in life. In this sense, home functions as a healing space for him.

Milkman is clearly happier in the South than he was in the North. But what is responsible for such transformation? Schreiber offers one explanation. According to him, Milkman’s journey to South helps him heal from the trauma that has been transferred across generation. Schreiber explains that such historical trauma can be of varying magnitudes and forms. At the psychological level, this trauma can come to children from physical separation from their parents during slavery. Schreiber adds that at the cultural level all the Black American people suffer it due to the White’s unjust construction of Black’s subjectivity in America. Like other Black Americans and their descendants, Milkman also has carried this historical trauma, although inadvertently, in his body which makes him feel like he is “lacking coherence” or limping.

Catherine Carr Lee, in “The South in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*: Initiation, Healing, and Home,” argues that Milkman’s journey is different from an initiation story where the hero goes away from the comfort of home to an urban setting, where he realizes the limitations of his own existence. In contrast to such initiation story, Lee explains, *Song of Solomon* is a journey that brings Milkman closer to his past. He leaves the urban setting of North behind and sets out to explore the rural areas of the South in search of a treasure. He finds this treasure in the form of knowledge about

himself, his ancestors and their past. Lee emphasizes that the knowledge of his past and his ancestors has a healing effect on Milkman, and it transforms him from an irresponsible immature person to someone who feels like a part of a community and is ready to take the responsibility for both his past and future.

The healing process that Milkman undergoes can be understood in the words of W.E.B Du Bois as the process of attaining "self-conscious manhood" (79). In the chapter "Our Spiritual Striving" from his book *The Souls of the Black Folks*, Du Bois explains the meaning and process of achieving "self-conscious manhood". Du Bois argues that African Americans suffer from what he calls "double consciousness" (74). He describes that double consciousness is the result of constantly looking at oneself through the standards of others. He adds, "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others... One ever feels his twoness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings" (74). He argues that "the history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better truer self" (74-75). Du Bois adds that the attempt to overcome double consciousness is also precisely the attempt to achieve self-conscious manhood, and the only means to achieve this is coming to terms with the reality of one's existence and embracing it wholly. For African Americans, this means embracing their history and racial pride and both the strengths and limitations of their socio-political status in America.

Milkman's quest for his 'home' can be understood as a representation of the entire race's quest for achieving this "self-conscious manhood". He achieves it once he is able to resolve the problem of double consciousness that he had inherited from his father Macon Dead I, and discovers himself fully in the South by embracing both his past and present. In this sense, South or 'home' also functions as a space where Milkman attains a "self-conscious manhood".

'Home' in *Song of Solomon* functions as a healing space also by facilitating a sense of connection and belongingness to a community and offering a sense of collective identity to its members. Valerie Smith, in "The Quest for and Discovery of Identity," interprets Milkman's journey as a quest for identity. Before coming to Virginia, he had assumed an individualistic notion of identity, which was shaped largely by the material possessions of his family. He had inherited this identity from his father Macon Dead, who had alienated himself from his community and relationships. As a result, he feels no sense of connection to the South, neither geographically nor emotionally. This lack of connection is visible easily during his journey from Pittsburgh to Danville in a Greyhound bus. Morrison describes Milkman's feeling during this journey: "His father had raved about the beauty of this part of the country, but milkman saw it as merely green, deep into its Indian summer but cooler than his own city, although it was farther

south" (*Song of Solomon* 226). The fact that Milkman failed to see this place anything beyond its face value shows his disconnection from that place. His disconnection from the community is also seen in the way the local Black people in Shalimar react to his arrival in the community. Morrison writes, "They looked at his skin and saw it was black as theirs, but these local Black people knew very well that he had the heart of the white men who came to pick them up in the trucks when they needed anonymous, faceless laborers" (*Song of Solomon* 266). The local's reaction to Milkman's presence in the South speaks volume about his upbringing in the North that was quite similar to White men although his skin was black.

Milkman's emotional disconnection from the community in the South is so huge that he feels lost from the very moment he arrives in Danville. Morrison describes this sense of loss vividly in the book: "Suddenly he felt ridiculous. What was he supposed to do? Put his suitcase down and ask the man: where is the cave near the farm where my father lived fifty-eight years ago? He knew nobody" (*Song of Solomon* 227). Milkman knows no one from the community and feels no sense of affinity with them. However, this feeling of loss and disconnectedness changes as his journey progresses in the plot.

The more Milkman spends time in the community in Virginia, the more he begins to learn about the community. Finally, the hunting expedition he sets out on along with the local Black people in Virginia initiates the final transformation in him that helps him discover his sense of connection with the community and his original identity. Smith argues that this journey helps Milkman discover links to his past and "connection with the earth" (40). Morrison's description of how Milkman behaves after the hunting expedition in Virginia also reflects this transformation:

Really laughing, he found himself exhilarated by simply walking the earth. Walking it like he belonged on it, like his legs were stalks, tree trunks, a part of his body that extended down down down into the rock and soil, and were comfortable there – on the earth and on the place where he walked. And he did not limp. (*Song of Solomon* 281)

After the expedition, Milkman also starts feeling a sense of connection with the local people in the community. Morrison also describes this transformation: "He didn't feel close to them, but he did feel connected, as though there was some cord or pulse or information they shared. Back home he had never felt that way, as though he belonged to anyplace or anybody" (*Song of Solomon* 290). After the expedition, Milkman learns from people in Danville and Shalimar that the meaning of 'home' is community, and this community or 'home' is what offers people a sense of identity and pride. He also notices that the entire village in Shalimar shares the common name "Shalimar" as their last names. That way everybody belongs to the same family, and he feels exhilarated by the idea that that he also belongs to the same large family. He sees that people in Danville

loved his grandfather dearly and identified with many parts of his grandfather's life. He also realizes how the entire community takes pride in his father's achievements and share in his grandfather's pain.

Music and song play instrumental role in determining one's membership to the Black community. So they also play an important role in understanding the motif of 'home' in *Song of Solomon*. In her article "Alternatives to the 'Talking Cure': Black Music as Traumatic Testimony in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*," Vikki Visvis describes how song links Milkman to his community: "Song's encoded history links Milkman to larger African American community, history, and tradition, and engenders a culturally contextualized sense of self" (Visvis 258). When Milkman listens to children singing the 'song of Solomon' in Shamilar, he fails to comprehend the words in that song initially. But when he learns the full story of his great-grandfather Solomon, he embraces that song and everything expressed in it wholeheartedly. He understands that "these children were singing a story about his own people! He hummed and chuckled as he did his best to put it all together" (*Song of Solomon* 302). As he learns to take the ownership of that song, he also earns his membership to that community or 'home' simultaneously.

#### **'Home' as an Abode of Ancestors**

'Home' also functions as an abode of ancestor in *Song of Solomon*. It is where an ancestor is present, and Milkman discovers this fact through his quest. Solomon is an ancestor in the village of Danville, and Milkman identifies his presence everywhere in the village. Morrison in her article "City Limits, Village Values: Concepts of the Neighborhood in Black fiction," explains that the presence of ancestors is what makes a city or village a good place to live in the works of Black writers. This presence of an ancestor makes characters happy and moral, while the absence is what these writers dread and abhor (35-43). In her another article "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," Morrison defines ancestor as "timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom" (62). In *Song of Solomon*, Solomon and Pilate function as ancestor figures who instruct, protect and heal Milkman in his journey.

After noticing this significance of ancestor's presence in a place to be called 'home', Milkman undergoes an immense positive transformation and expansion. Readers can sense this expansion when he returns to his friend Sweet's home after learning about his grandfather, and he demands that an outdoor bath is what he needs because an indoor bath is too small and restrictive to fit his new-found expansiveness. "The sea! I have to swim in the sea. Don't give me no itty bitty teeny tiny tub, girl, I need the whole entire complete deep blue sea!" he says (*Song of Solomon* 326). His transformation is also visible when he returns from his journey back to Pilate's home in the North. Morrison



captures this moment of his encounter with Pilate: "Milkman opened his arms wide so he could hold all of her in a warm embrace" (*Song of Solomon* 331). The effect of his journey and discovery is such that he feels ready to "hold all of her," and this shows how Milkman has come to appreciate Pilate as an ancestor and everything that she represents.

### **'Home' – To Have a Good and Well-Lived Life, Not Prosperity and Progress**

It is important to notice that Milkman achieves this sense of confidence and expansiveness by literally following on the footsteps of his ancestor Pilate. When he fails to find gold in Danville, he decides to go to Virginia because that is where Pilate had gone too, and he assumes that she has hidden the gold somewhere in Virginia. So he is literally following Pilate's footsteps. Morrison emphasizes, "Milkman followed in her tracks" (*Song of Solomon* 258). He continues to follow in the trail of his ancestors till the end of the novel until he discovers his true self. Morrison writes, "... now he knew what Shalimar knew, if you surrender to the air, you could ride it" (337) – this is the last line of the novel, and it is significant because it speaks of ancestor's immense transformative influence on Milkman. By the end of his journey, he "knew what Shalimar knew" and he feels ready to follow in the ancestor Shalimar's tracks. Hence, his journey culminates in his discovering the ancestor figures and then eventually following in their footsteps to finally find a 'home' for him.

Laura Dubek in "'Pass it On!': Legacy and the Freedom Struggle in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*" talks about the importance of following in the footsteps of one's ancestors in the quest for identity or 'home'. Dubek describes Milkman's journey back to the South as reconnecting to the ancestors and his original 'home'. Dubek writes, "Listen carefully, however, and you will hear a drumbeat of caution in Morrison's novel: in marching ahead, we must continually "turn back" (96). If we describe Milkman's journey in Dubek's term, Milkman is literally "turning back" to his ancestors, and in doing so, he is able to find both his 'home' and his identity.

Ancestors are also the bearers of tradition, and they symbolize continuity in *Song of Solomon*. The ancestor figure Pilate is a living symbol of such a sense of continuity. She literally carries her "name" in her earlobes. Lucinda H Mackethan in her article "Names to Bear Witness: The Theme and Tradition of Naming in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*," explores the meaning and function of naming in the lives of *Song of Solomon*'s characters as well in the wider context of Black Americans. She emphasizes that names can signal either the acceptance or rejection of one's heritage. Macon Dead I and his Indian wife accepted the new name in the hope and spirit that it will wipe out their past of slavery. However, it did not happen, and they had to become victims of a racialized past when Macon Dead was shot dead in the fence of his farm. On the other hand, Guitar's name and Pilate's name signal their acceptance of their inheritance and

the responsibility that comes with it. Morrison writes, "Pilate had taken a rock from every state she had lived in – because she had lived there. And having lived there, it was hers – and his, and his father's, his grandfather's, his grandmothers" (*Song of Solomon* 329). Milkman's journey to South brings to him his family name and, with it, his identity. He learns to appreciate people who have hold on to this sense of family name and identity.

The idea of 'home' in *Song of Solomon* is free from the Western individualist notion of progress. Guitar, Milkman's friend, believes Macon Dead "behaves like a white man, thinks like a white man" (223). However, Macon Dead I's son Milkman finds home when he leaves North and its material prosperity and goes back to the South, which is still not as advanced as the American North in terms of material prosperity. Back in the South people are still relatively closer to nature and their way of life is untouched by the external progress that North signifies for Black Americans.

It is significant to note that as Milkman sets off in his journey to the South, he gradually begins to cast off all the markers of material prosperity: his shoes are torn down and his clothes suffer wear and tear. This process of casting off one's external markers of identity is complete when he dresses entirely differently for the hunting expedition with the Black folks in Virginia. One of the local Black folks gives him new shoes to "stand in". This literally signifies his metamorphosis. Similarly, he realizes that he has been losing everything that he once thought he owned since he embarked in this journey. "I am losing everything" (*Song of Solomon* 294), he says, after he loses his watch. He loses his watch, his suit, his car, and he finds that the skills he thought were useful are infact useless when he to face dangers of the jungle. Morrison emphasizes, "In fact they hampered him. Except for his broken watch, and his wallet with about two hundred dollars, all he had started out with on his journey was gone" (*Song of Solomon* 277). After losing his external possessions during the hunting expedition, Milkman learns that what come handy in life are the things that one is born with.

In his article "People Who Could Fly," Julius Lester describes the myth of African American slaves who could fly into the air and vanish from the plantation field where they were forced to work like animals. A parallel can be drawn between the mythical flight of these slaves and the figurative flight of Milkman: he and these mythical flying slaves are similar in the sense that both of them fly their way back to home and to freedom. In doing so, it requires them to shed off their belonging that makes them feel heavy. The significance of casting off everything that is heavy in order to be able to fly is expressed by Milkman's friend Guitar earlier in the novel as well. Solomon too had to leave behind his family and children in order to fly, and Milkman gets rid of the weight of his class and material possessions before he can fly high.

J. Brooks Bouson explores this theme of the baggage that keeps one from flying in his article "Can't Nobody Fly with All That Shit: The Shame and Pride Axis and Black Masculinity in *Song of Solomon*". This article, which examines Milkman's journey to the South as a quest of his identity, describes Milkman as a character who has been weighed down by what he "carries". Bouson argues that what Milkman has been carrying is the "shit not only of his family's false class pride but also of inherited familial and racial shame" (75). Bouson views Milkman as the representative of the "middle-class African American males who have amnesia about their cultural history" (75), and what causes this forgetting is the "mask" of bourgeoisie that they all have worn. Milkman's family's class pride keeps him from understanding his true origin. His evolution as a hero is the journey of getting rid of this mask of class pride, which he has inherited primarily from his father. Once he does that, he is able to reconnect with his community.

In Wehner's view Milkman undergoes an "indispensable metamorphosis of inner self" during his journey before he reaches South, which according to Wehner, is a space where one can live one's life well and intensely" (72). Here Wehner introduces a new dimension to the meaning of 'home' as a space where life is good. He argues that Milkman does not leave home and set off in a journey like in traditional "initiation stories". He starts a journey which ends with his discovery of 'home' and a life that is intense and meaningful. In that sense South in *Song of Solomon* also functions as a home which rejects Western idea of prosperity and progress, and by doing so it makes it possible for people living there to have a good and well-lived life.

### **Conclusion**

'Home' in Morrison's *Song of Solomon* is both a geographical space as well as a metaphorical concept. It conveys multiple meanings and performs significant functions within the novel. A 'home' is what Milkman finds at the end of his journey. This 'home' is free from individualistic and materialistic notion of progress. It is marked by racial history and is enriched by the presence of ancestors like Pilate and Solomon. It also means a community and people drawing their sense of identity and integrity through participation in that community and through the relationships they maintain with the community members. More importantly, it functions as a healing space that heals Milkman's trauma and has the potential of healing the trauma of numerous Black Americans like him.

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