

WOMEN WHO MAKE A MAN: FEMALE PROTAGONISTS IN TONI MORRISON'S SONG OF SOLOMON

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The central character of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* is Milkman—a male—, but the novel is, nevertheless, supported by a brilliant cast of female protagonists. These women include Milkman's paternal aunt—Pilate—cousin—Hagar—mother—Ruth—and sisters—Magdalene called Lena and First Corinthians. Harry Reed notes that Milkman's quest is "buttressed by his female relationships. The fluid constellations of black women loving him, supporting him, guiding him and even rejecting him confirm the nurturing aspects of black life" (54). All these characters contribute significantly, but in varying measures, to Milkman's development from a headstrong, chauvinistic, arrogant, materialistic young man to a mature person who finally comes to appreciate the richness of his African background as well as the worth of his ancestors, and makes both an integral part of his identity and selfhood. Each woman demonstrates characteristics and personality traits very different from those of the others. This paper seeks to study these female characters to show how their race-consciousness develops as a result of their experiences—both within and outside the community—and manifests itself in their varying attitudes toward life. Even as these women lead Milkman toward an understanding of his true self, the search for their own identity and purpose in life, the craving to understand who they are, and what they desire becomes, eventually, the deciding factor between life and death, self affirmation and self negation, ecstatic joy or desperate misery. It decides, ultimately, who finds meaning in life and whose years on the earth are a waste—and why.

Ruth Foster Dead is the first of the Dead women to be introduced in the story. She is the wife of a ruthless real estate agent—Macon Dead (he is literally "Ruth-less" because he does not even acknowledge her presence)—and the daughter of the first Negro doctor in town—the late Dr. Foster—a rather conceited man who takes pride

in his wealthy, light-skinned family, and feels superior to other black people. Morrison depicts Ruth as a motherless girl whose pathetic existence can be traced back to a rich but lonely childhood and her subsequent, unfortunate marriage to the ferocious, money-minded Macon Dead who keeps "each member of his family awkward with fear" (*Song of Solomon* 10).¹ Even though Ruth lives a life of comparative luxury and affluence, initially because of her father's position, and later because of her husband's, she derives no happiness from it. She considers herself too superior to other black women, and is ignored by the white women who know her father. During her father's lifetime, her days are marked only by an unusual devotion to him which continues in strange ways even after his death. On the day that Dr. Foster dies, Macon discovers Ruth lying naked next to her father's dead body, with his fingers in her mouth (she vehemently denies this fact when Milkman confronts her, but Macon is convinced that he is right). Extremely repulsed by the sight, he decides on the spot to have nothing to do with her henceforth. Morrison paints a rather miserable picture of Ruth, and attributes most of her problems to the lack of meaningful love in her life. She is, in Pilate's words, "dying of lovelessness" (151). Her father's death and Macon's abhorrence of her lead her to an uncanny relationship with her son whom she continues to breast-feed till he is well past infancy. Even though she senses Milkman's "restraint, his courtesy, his indifference" (13), it only pushes "her into fantasy. She had the distinct impression that his lips were pulling from her a thread of light. It was as though she were a cauldron spinning gold.... And that was the other part of her pleasure, a pleasure she hated to give up" (13-14). Ruth feeds Milkman not because she derives sexual pleasure from it, but because it makes her feel important and useful—as if she is lending him sustenance and life. Ironically, however, the milk with which she hopes to nourish him succeeds only in choking all the love out of him so that, like the late Doctor, he too begins to find her attentions unwanted and unnecessarily stifling.

In Ruth Foster Dead, Morrison creates a black woman whose life is meaningless because she makes no attempt to justify her existence. She is immensely passive, and terribly apathetic toward her own self. She enjoys all the privileges of being connected to a rich and influential family, but does not utilise them either for personal growth or for the betterment of the community. She has inherited

¹ Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (London: Picador in association with Chatto and Windus, 1993). All subsequent references are to this edition, and appear in parentheses throughout this paper.

this trait in part from her father. Karla Holloway blames Dr. Foster for rearing Ruth "away from her heritage—establishing her as the 'doctor's daughter' and therefore less black than the townsfolk he services. He values her lighter skin precisely because of his desire for this demarcation between his daughter and other black people. As adults, Ruth and Macon Jr. perpetuate this distancing" (106). Since Ruth has been brought up without a native, ethnic cultural identity, she lives under the misapprehension that she is superior to other black folks and must not associate with them. She and her husband never cross the societal boundaries that separate them from the rest of the community because doing so would mean a degrading descent down the social ladder. Ruth knows very well that Macon is cruel and unsympathetic when it comes to collecting money from the poor blacks who rent his houses, but she never comes to their rescue. She is never assertive enough to stand up to her husband and demand that he treat other members of the community with compassion and respect. Her disinterestedness in the black community is all the more strange because she has both the means and the potential to alleviate some of its miseries—but lacks the initiative. Though Macon Dead holds an iron hand over her, she does have the guts to assert herself and stand up to him when she wants to—and does so only once—when she compels him to part with a substantial amount of cash for Hagar's funeral. In the entire book, this is her only redeeming act, but it comes too late. She has already become a stranger to her own family, and a permanent alien in the black community to which she rightfully belongs. Her emulation of hollow white values, and conceited efforts to maintain a superior, elitist lifestyle, also tells on both her daughters, and adversely affects their initial growth and development too.

Both Lena and Corinthians are unmarried, and still living with their parents even though they are in their forties. Their lack of initiative and drive can also be traced back to their childhood spent under the shadow of a tyrannical father like Macon Dead and an insipid mother like Ruth Dead. Both try their level best and succeed, for the most part, at keeping the girls away from other black people whom they consider socially inferior. They try to inculcate in the children the values of elitist, white, America—emphasising the importance of money and social status. Even though Lena and Corinthians appear to live a privileged and luxurious life, their existence is no less artificial than the roses they laboriously make out of red velvet—showy and delicate on the outside—no substance inside. Just as the girls cut out patterns from velvet, Macon cruelly cuts out all spunk and individuality from their personalities and shapes them into models of envy for the

rest of the community. Lena and Corinthians are, therefore, ultimately caught in the same rut as their mother. In spite of their advantageous position in society, they too remain trapped in the tangled web of their family life—a shadow that haunts them wherever they go.

Only Corinthians makes an attempt to pull her life together by going to a prestigious white women's college. She even spends her junior year abroad in France, but it does not fetch for her the advantages she had assumed it would—working, rather unfortunately, to her disadvantage instead. Morrison implies here that the American education system trains people only in the elitist pursuits of life, and deludes them into believing that they are far above others of their class. This is exactly what happens to Corinthians, and she suffers greatly because of it. Ruth has led her to believe that her education will enable her to become “a prize for a professional man of color” (188), but her hopes are dashed because the coloured men of the day desire wives who are not complacent. They seek women who would appreciate the struggle for social status and hold on to it (once they had acquired it) as a priceless possession. Corinthians is a misfit in their midst because she is “a little too elegant” (188) for them, and her training is such that it gives them an inferiority complex. Her wealth and education, unfortunately, do not allow her to become part of either the black or the white community—leaving her suspended between the two classes instead. Stephanie Demetrakopoulos suggests that Corinthians is “a perfect example of the educated Ivy League daughter who is to use her class and learning only as a persona, as a decoration for her family” (96). This comment reveals an unfortunate truth: Macon and Ruth are so obsessed with their elitist image, that they literally display Corinthians as just another ornament to adorn their house and assert their superiority over other members of the community. Education objectifies Corinthians.

In an ironical turn of events, Corinthians' quest for independence, and her determination to find a job, ultimately leads her to become a maid to Miss Grahams—the State Poet Laureate. She, however, tells her family that she is an “amanuensis.” Holloway contends that “a college-educated woman having to assume the position of a maid...illustrates the psychological and social abuse suffered and endured by black women who work in these roles, subjugating their pride for some personal goal” (110). This comment demonstrates that black women in white society are not recognized for their true capabilities. They have to constantly diminish and negate their achievements because the dominant culture, and its influence on their own families, does not let them rise above social and cultural stereotypes. In spite of this, however, being a maid benefits Corinthians in several

ways. The very fact that she chooses a difficult and humbling occupation over the pompousness of her earlier life-style allows her to shed the enormous burden of hypocrisy, and free herself of the shackles of social superiority her parents had wrapped around her. It also makes romance with Henry Porter (her social inferior) possible, and ultimately allows her to view herself as part of the community to which she belongs. These developments suggest that Corinthians succeeds in making an attempt to carve an identity for herself, and identify her own priorities—the formal beginning of the formation of her consciousness as an individual.

Lena's existence is quite different from that of Corinthians'. In a completely unremarkable life, her only redeeming act is when she rebels, just once, against her brother, Milkman. She finds out that Milkman has complained to Macon about Corinthians' relationship with Porter—with the result that her father has forbidden Corinthians to go out, made her give up her job, and had Porter evicted from his house. Lena calls Milkman to her room and gives him the proverbial piece of her mind: "where do you get the right to decide our lives?.... I'll tell you where. From that hog's gut that hangs down between your legs" (215). These words demonstrate Lena's outrage at the fact that a mere biological reality gives men the right to dominate each female member of the family. They also draw attention to the disturbing extent to which the Deads have adopted the white value system—believing that only a male can control the family and propagate its name. Black values that emphasize the importance and contributions of women as important mother figures are totally neglected. Demetrakopoulos views the life of Lena and Corinthians as "a true, bitter, virulent portrait of what happens to sisters who are made subservient body-servants to a selfish, adored brother simply because he is male" (95). This comment suggests that the Dead household is not unique in its mistreatment and neglect of women. It is merely symbolic of the preference families give to male children over female ones. Lena falls a total victim to this concept of women as the less privileged sex. She represents the women who continue to be repressed and dominated by the male species, but do not give enough importance to their own selves to retaliate against the existing system and go in quest of their own identities.

Milkman's sisters are, however, not the only women who suffer because of his arrogant, domineering attitude. His association with Pilate's granddaughter, Hagar, has a drastic and fatally damaging effect on her. He abruptly ends their twelve-year-long romantic relationship by writing her a cold, callous note. A few days later, she spies him in a bar with another girl, "whose silky copper-colored hair cascaded over

the sleeve of his coat" (127). Hagar is totally devastated, and goes mad with jealousy. She seeks revenge by trying to kill Milkman—and stalks him with an ice-pick or knife at the oddest of moments and in the strangest of places, but never succeeds. Milkman's friend, Guitar, feels sorry for her, and knows exactly what she needs: "She needed what most colored girls needed: a chorus of mamas, grandmamas, aunts, cousins, sisters, neighbors, Sunday school teachers, best girl friends, and what all to give her the strength life demanded of her—and the humor with which to live it" (307). These comments, though bordering on the tongue-in-cheek, indicate that Hagar must get in touch with her essential roots with a little guidance from women who make up the core of the black community, and are capable of passing on its sustaining qualities to her through their nurturing abilities. Hagar has, however, been conditioned by exposure to the majority culture, to think of a successful woman as one who is beautiful, one who dresses up in chic clothes, and one who has men falling at her feet. It is because she has internalized these false, empty concepts that she finds herself greatly lacking when she looks into the small mirror in the pink compact gifted to her by Pilate. "I look awful. No wonder he didn't want me. I look terrible" (308). Edward Guerrero interprets Hagar's looking into the mirror as an invocation of a "deadly, ensnaring, self-reflexive gaze into an alien standard of beauty." He contends, therefore, that by rejecting her reflection in the mirror, she rejects, essentially, "the self shaped by the traditions and lifestyles of...Pilate and...Reba, both of whom represent Nature...and...work against the allure of outward appearances and the colonizing powers of 'the look.' Hagar fantasizes a persona that she imagines will make her more desirable to...Milkman" (769). In a stubborn negation of all that Pilate and Reba stand for, Hagar detests her dark looks, and yearns for the kind of face and hair that she thinks Milkman would appreciate—smooth, pale skin and silky hair. She decides to get up and "fix" (308) herself up by going shopping for the latest in clothes and cosmetics.

The description of Hagar's desperate shopping spree demonstrates the extent to which the white culture propagates the values of success based on materialism and a certain fixed concept of beauty. The underlying assumption is that a woman is worthy only if she is desirable to men—and they will find her attractive only if she lures them by the power of her clothes, make-up and perfume. Hagar tries to be alluring and beautiful for Milkman by attempting to diminish and tone down her African looks in favour of a more Westernized style. Western white culture presents fantasy as reality, and hypnotizes the consumer into believing that she too can enjoy the ecstasy that

follows a successful seduction only if she has a peaches and cream complexion (guaranteed by their products) and lounges around in satin robes. Hagar falls a hapless victim to these calculated bates, and spends a fortune purchasing clothes and cosmetics so that she can achieve the desired look that would win Milkman's heart.

The look is, however, out of her reach—in every possible way. As she returns home, she gets caught in a downpour, and all the chic, new items fall into dirty mud puddles. Morrison paints a pathetic picture of Hagar as she bends to retrieve one or two items while the others fall out. Her inability to hold on to these chic, Western items symbolizes the futility of her mission—her attempt to transform the ugly crow into the proverbially beautiful swan. Hagar reaches home “limp, wet, and confused, clutching her bundles in whatever way she could” (314). She rushes straight into her room and, without drying herself, puts on her new, dirty, soiled clothes, and plasters wet, lumpy make-up all over her face. It is only when she presents herself for Reba and Pilate's inspection that she becomes aware of the pathos of her condition.

It was in their eyes that she saw what she had not seen before in the mirror: the wet ripped hose, the soiled white dress, the sticky, lumpy face powder, the streaked rouge, and the wild wet shoals of hair. All this she saw in their eyes, and the sight filled her own with water warmer and much older than the rain. Water that lasted for hours, until the fever came, and then it stopped. The fever dried her eyes up as well as her mouth. (314)

This episode is significant because it shows Hagar's acceptance of reality—and what it does to her. She realizes that she can never become the kind of beauty she has seen advertised in the shopping mall, but she cannot reconcile to this cruel fact. She finds it difficult to believe that the products that promise so much deliver so little—and make her look so ridiculous. The sheer disappointment she feels manifests itself into tears of desperation and frustration, and then a dangerous fever that refuses to subside.

As Hagar's temperature rises, she murmurs deliriously, that Milkman “loves silky hair.... Penny-colored hair.... And lemon-colored skin.... And gray-blue eyes.... And thin nose.... He's never going to like my hair” (315-316). The description she gives is that of a typical light-skinned beauty—with complexion and hair she now knows she can never have. These are the last desperate words that Hagar speaks before her voice is silenced forever, and her ugliness buried with her. She dies believing that she has failed in life because she could not get Milkman's love since she never possessed the traditional beauty that would make romance possible and lend meaning to her existence.

Susan Willis argues that "Hagar's hysteria and death mark the limits of her assimilation into bourgeoisie culture. Neither through withdrawal nor through commodity consumption can [she] transform herself into an object. Her marginality, by reason of race and lumpen background, is the basis for her inalienable human dimension. As Morrison might have put it, she is simply too black, too passionate, too human ever to become reified" (312). Willis interprets Hagar's inability to become white-like as a failure to be commodified ("reified") and views it as the reason for her failed initiation into bourgeoisie society. In spite of her best efforts, her native cultural background—the inherited essence of Africanism—keeps her from becoming an object of appreciation for the male gaze. Hagar, unfortunately, is unable to appreciate this fact, and instead of viewing the resistance as her strength, allows it to become the reason for her doom.

Hagar's negative outlook and alarmingly low self image are juxtaposed by Pilate's zest for life and her self-affirmation. The difference lies in the way each views herself against the culture to which she rightfully belongs, and the culture in which she has to live. Pilate rejects the very values that Hagar reveres. She looks with disdain on Western concepts of success and prosperity, and lives without modern amenities such as electricity, gas and running water. She is different from the other women characters of the novel in several ways—the first being a freakish physical reality. She does not have a navel, and is rumoured to have birthed herself—since her mother dies seconds before she was born. She lives on the outskirts of town, and practices an unconventional profession—the illegal production and sale of home-made liquor. Unmarried by choice, she heads a strange house-hold of women consisting of her daughter Reba, and a thoroughly spoilt granddaughter, Hagar. Pilate is possessive only about her bag of bones, her geography book, the rocks she has collected from each place she visited during her twenty years of wandering, and her name which she wears in an earring made out of her mother's brass snuff box. These objects, and the owner's reverence toward them, indicate her strong ties to her past, and her veneration of the culture that has shaped her. Valerie Smith writes that "instead of repressing the past, she carries it with her in the form of her songs, her stories and her bag of bones. She believes that one's sense of identity is rooted in the capacity to look back to the past and synthesize it with the present; it is not enough simply to put it behind one and look forward" (729). Though Pilate settles down in a predominantly white town where she has access to various contemporary comforts, she rejects them in favour of a simple, natural lifestyle. She does not view progress as something that involves a negation of history, and a

concentration on only the future. Rather, she integrates her ethnicity into her present lifestyle and, by selecting emotional treasures over material wealth, braces herself against the onslaught of Western materialism that Macon Dead's family is prey to.

By identifying herself as part of a larger African community, Pilate is able to reject the imprisonment of white society that entraps Macon's family. Though both brother and sister have carved independent lives for themselves, their priorities are entirely different. Macon has deliberately internalized white values, and measures success in terms of money, property and social status. Pilate, on the other hand, derides such values and draws sustenance only from her memories of the past, her father's words, and a recognition of herself as part of a larger black community. She does not allow the white West to dictate or dominate her lifestyle.

Reed contends that Pilate "transcends...gender-related oppression...She can not only support and live happily within a woman-centered environment but she can also accept the love of men without being devastated by its absence" (58). Pilate has experienced love of the finest kind, and rejected it deliberately because she had felt that she would not be able to hide her navel-less stomach from a husband forever. She does not, however, allow this loss to hamper her growth—viewing it instead as something that frees rather than victimizes her. This suggests that even early in life, when she is most vulnerable, she has both the confidence to stand alone and the ability to rise above traditional Western anxieties about women being incomplete without the support of a man. Unlike Ruth, Pilate rejects artificial Western values symbolized by table manners and hygiene—the cleanliness of only the body as opposed to that of the mind or spirit. She also places a high value on the words spoken by her dead father, and follows his advice as she interprets it. All these traits connect her to her African past, and give her the sustenance required for surviving whole in a world given to the emptiness of etiquette and the artificiality of modern survival techniques.

Pilate's basic initiation into life thus puts her through various tests—the most notable of which are poverty, communal isolation, and early orphaning. She, however, emerges as a strong individual because she draws sustenance from her racial memories and never breaks the vital connection to her native agricultural past. This is why, though she can claim no umbilical cord that has linked her genealogically to traditional mother figures, she is the one, of all the female characters, who is most connected to her African heritage, and whose relationships with other people have always been nurturing ones. Her words are comforting, her touch is healing, and her concoc-

tions or potions always work where other endeavours fail. Milkman is conceived because of the home-made herbal mixture she gives Ruth to put in Macon's food when she learns that they have not had a physical relationship since Dr. Foster's death. He is born because she thwarts Macon's attempts to force Ruth to abort him by placing on his office chair a male voodoo doll with a red circle painted on its stomach, and a small chicken bone stuck between its legs. She uses these traditional means to ensure both protection and privacy for Ruth—instead of going to the police or a social welfare organization which would have violated the latter without guaranteeing the former. Just as she plays a crucial role in bringing Milkman into the world, so she instils in him a craving to discover his true identity and roots—to go in search of his name—to trace his origins back to his rich African past so that he can shed the false illusions he has been brought up with, and be able to surrender to the air so that he can ride it.

Referring to the significance of Pilate's name, several critics have asserted that she acts as a literal pilot who shows Milkman the way out of the snobbish, elitist white world and leads him to a genuine appreciation of his rich ethnic origins. Peter Bruck contends that "Pilate emerges as Milkman's pilot, guiding him...out of the death-world of his parents towards his true destiny, i.e. the discovery of his African heritage" (293). Bruck refers to Macon and Ruth's world as a "deathworld" because it encompasses only hollow values related to the amassment of material wealth and lays emphasis on a decadent, artificial, bourgeoisie lifestyle. It does not throb with the pulse of life, love, caring, and the richness of natural values as Pilate's household does. Milkman, therefore, needs genealogical guidance from his aunt to emerge out of this Hades-like environment, and breathe the free air of his sweet cultural heritage.

Though Pilate's life is full of creditable deeds, her greatest failure is her inability to instil in her beloved granddaughter, Hagar, the authentic African values she herself holds so sacred. Pilate's one failure is devastating for Hagar and ultimately marks for her the difference between life and death. As her granddaughter gives up her life in desperation, Pilate turns the Christian funeral service into a genuine African ritual at the end of which she declares passionately, as if trying to convince herself along with the rest of the congregation, "And she was *loved*" (319). Reed observes that "through her actions, Pilate rejected the empty Christian sermonizing. Her references were to activities Hagar shared with the living: the music, the morning and the evening" (59). This comment suggests that Pilate chooses to perform Hagar's last rites in true African fashion—more in keeping with her own preferences. She thus brings an element of

warmth and compassion to an otherwise impersonal, rigidly prim and proper ceremony so far removed from the way she and her family have always lived. Most importantly, however, by manipulating the funeral service, Pilate does for Hagar in death what she could not do for her in life—integrates her into African culture and reclaims for her the ethnic heritage Hagar had, unfortunately, never learned to acknowledge during her lifetime. Pilate also performs another duty for her granddaughter when she presents a shoe box full of Hagar's hair to Milkman on his return from the South. A matured and mellow Milkman, just back from a journey that has helped him rediscover himself, has already realized the magnitude of his folly. He receives the box with gratitude—promising to hold on to the hair as a prized possession. Smith explains that "Milkman, insensitive to Hagar and unwilling to accept responsibility for her in life, understands her posthumously and assumes the burden of her death...[he] resolve[s] to carry with him the box of Hagar's hair: a symbol of his newly acquired cyclical vision of a past he no longer needs to escape" (731). After his journey, Milkman has learned to appreciate both the larger and the immediate community of black women surrounding him. He has also attained a new selfhood by assimilating himself into his past, and by recognizing the real value of his ethnic background—a background that he had previously shunned in favour of white, upper-class values. His acceptance of Hagar's hair signifies a victory for Pilate not only because she succeeds in exorcizing her granddaughter's unrequited-love ghost but also because it indicates that she has finally handed down to her nephew the priceless legacy of his African heritage. He is now able to understand why the hair is as much part of him as it was part of her, and finally realizes the value of the tresses he could not cherish while Hagar was alive.

Milkman also reveals to Pilate the intricate messages contained in her father's words which she had hitherto been misinterpreting, and stuns her by the revelation that she has, in fact, been carrying his bones around rather than those of the white man. He then takes her back to Virginia so that she can bury the bones on Solomon's Leap. It is here that Guitar, who has come in search of Milkman, shoots him, and kills Pilate. As she lies dying, she tells Milkman, "I wish I'd a knowed more people.... If I'd a knowed more, I would a loved more" (336). Even her last words are about other people—indicating her selfless devotion to the black community—and her willingness to sacrifice her self in its service. She wants to embrace all humanity—to pass on the priceless value of the African cultural heritage to the black world before she departs from it. As Milkman bends over her, she asks him to sing to her. For the first time in his entire life, Milkman

raises his voice in song. He renders for her the Sugargirl version of her favourite Sugarman song—the song of Shalimar (Solomon) which has already conveyed its legendary wisdom to the singer and helped him define himself genealogically and communally. As Pilate breathes her last, Milkman finally understands that “without ever leaving the ground, she could fly” (336). This understanding is compounded by the image of a bird that scoops Pilate’s earring in its beak, and flies away. Milkman realizes that Pilate could fly because she was without vanity, without complexes, and not bound to the ground by earthly possessions or materialistic desires. She had, instead, the rare quality of detachment that allowed her to soar far above the rest of the world. She was one of the mythic flying Africans who could rise above the literal and metaphoric enslavement to white society and fly back to the freedom of their African past and ethnic origins.

Perhaps the character most similar to Pilate in disposition and spirit is Circe—an old (or, rather, ancient) black woman whose white employer kills Macon Dead Senior—Pilate and Macon’s father. Circe shelters the young siblings till they come to terms with the tragedy and are able to fend for themselves. Just as her healing touch soothes and protects them when they are impressionable, innocent, and stunned, her prophetic wisdom guides Milkman several years later—when his quest for his true identity leads him to her house. Judith Fletcher draws an impelling connection between Morrison’s Circe in *Song of Solomon* and Homer’s Circe in *Odyssey*. She contends that Circe plays a pivotal role in Milkman’s awakening.

Milkman’s episode with [Circe] has been, despite his disappointed expectations, a transformative experience. She is a liminal figure who mediates between death and life, but she also sits at the portal between two stories, not only the two sections of the novel, but also the novel and the epic tradition. Under her direction time for Milkman has folded in on itself: he experiences a reversal of the birth process and is then reborn. (414)

When Morrison tinges Circe’s character with an epic and mythical quality, she turns the quest of a mere individual (Milkman) into the quest of generations of people who go relentlessly about the business of living without any inkling of a rich and abundant past that can give meaning to their existence. Circe is a housekeeper and midwife by profession—with both words connoting deeper meanings. She is, in essence, a keeper of the house of Africa. It is as if she has willed herself to surpass the average lifespan of an average woman so that she can keep African traditions alive in an alien land as long as possible. She is able to kindle in Milkman’s heart an appreciation of long-cherished and revered black customs and values—thus ensuring that they will be passed on to future generations as well.

The uncanny longevity of her life, combined with her rather obvious aging, gives her an almost ethereal, mystical, enigmatic quality—all of which combine to have a mesmerising effect on Milkman. In spite of himself, Milkman finds that he is pushed along—as if by a spell—to go in search of his true identity. At another level, Circe has literally helped countless mothers to bring countless babies into the world, but figuratively she acts as a midwife for Milkman—delivering him from ignorance into knowledge, from a meaningless existence to a meaningful one. She gives a new birth to him because she motivates him to discover the real names of his people and places—all of which are an integral part of him and his identity. She teaches him to cherish who he is and where he comes from. It is with her figurative, mythical touch that she subtly wipes away the sheen of complacency and uncaring that shrouds his being like the amniotic fluid—and a new, awed, yet wiser Milkman emerges.

This essay is not about Milkman's exemplary awakening, however, but about the women who shaped his quest and made such a self-discovery possible. Roberta Rubenstein asserts that Morrison "portrays a hero who achieves manhood by assimilating a traditionally female moral perspective into his previously limited vision...the sacrifices on his behalf by Pilate and others generate his own sense of himself as part of a community to which he belongs by reciprocal responsibility" (151). Milkman is able to define himself as an individual only because of the contributions of the remarkable women he has come in contact with. His rediscovery of his selfhood and new identity as a black man is compounded by a new awareness of these women in his life whom he had always taken for granted.

In *Song of Solomon*, therefore, Morrison seems to have scored a double victory. The main character is male, but he becomes a complete man only because of the direct and indirect but always powerful influences of the women in his life. These women themselves grow, develop and change because of Milkman's involvement in their lives. After finally laying her dead father's ghost by burying his bones, Pilate dies secure in the knowledge that she has ultimately understood the message contained in the words he always repeated to her. Hagar dies posthumously appreciated by Milkman, and one hopes that her ghost will rest in peace. Lena and Ruth continue in pretty much the same way, but both have redeemed themselves slightly. Lena has finally released her pent-up anger at Milkman, and Ruth has atoned for his deplorable act by ensuring a decent burial for Hagar. Corinthians emerges as the most successful of the Dead women (excluding Pilate) because she finally realizes that self-worth is more important than material worth, and begins to appreciate her new identity. She

learns to defy her tyrannical father, and finds that she has no qualms about living with Porter in a small, ramshackle house. She learns, in essence, to listen to her heart, and to appreciate herself for what she *is*, rather than what she *has*. Morrison reiterates in the end that the women who define themselves in terms of their ethnic heritage and larger community do not need to validate their existence by the presence of such externals as the compulsory love of a man, a craving for material wealth or the desire to be beautiful by majority standards. This suggests, ultimately, that the women who deride their blackness or try not to acknowledge it fail in life—like Hagar and Ruth. Those who view it with pride from the beginning or learn to respect it later, find in it their greatest strength and their happiest reason for living—or dying.

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