

Recovering Black Women's Subjectivity Through Reconstructed Myths in Toni Morrison's Fiction

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Joseph Campbell in his book *The Power of Myth* (1988) defined myth as the search “[f]or the experience of being alive”, a “centering in terms of deep principles” (xvi). According to him myths are also stories, messages, and clues that unlock the mysteries of life. It has since become a serious preoccupation with writers, artistes and critical thinkers of the modern era. Myths permeate every aspect of traditional life and culture. They shape peoples lives, their ways of thinking and continue to shape the way people understand themselves and the world. They are no longer meant to be relegated to ancient times but resonate in the here and the now.

Myth has always been an area of interest in African American literature. Despite critics questioning the appropriateness of traditional myths in reflecting modern black experience, African American writers have incorporated mythic structures into their works. They combine myth with a strong awareness of their oppressed situation. Toni Morrison, in her fictional works, searches for myths adequate for the African American experience, especially black women's experience, shifting the focus from myth as a traditional story transmitted from generation to generation to myth, as a tool to understand the past necessary for the survival of African Americans in the modern world. In an interview with Bessie W. Jones, she said, “Myth is the first information there is, and it says realms more than what is usually there” (144).

Song of Solomon, Morrison's third novel, is her first work to have a black man as protagonist and so consequently centers around all things male. However, while the story revolves round the novel's hero, Milkman's quest for freedom and wealth, it also highlights the absence of such meaningful events in the lives of black women. The multiple mythic references, folkloric and legendary stories combined with its complex narrative style highlighting the awareness of lack within the black community gives the text its polemics. What Morrison attempts to achieve in her novel is to undermine the Western and African American myths that disempower and devalue black womanhood. In the novel Morrison juxtaposes the African American folklore of a flying African with the Western myth of Icarus to show how flight is perceived in the two cultures. In the classical myth, Icarus, the Cretan hero of Greek mythology overestimates his own abilities and attempts to “break free of the earth”. He disobeys his father's instructions, his wings melt under the strong rays of the sun and he falls

into the sea. The Icarian mythic pattern is one of personal quest, to test the individual's potential. It is a flight from authority and repression and though it ends in death it is a flight towards freedom. Thus, flight in the Western tradition stands for freedom. However, flying has been historically denied and socially forbidden to African Americans. The hegemonic culture restricted the freedom of the subjugated stating that their desire to fly was "audacious and presumptuous" (Mori 140). In the absence of the freedom to fly in real life, African Americans created the myth of a flying hero which is one of the most prominent ancestral myths in African culture. In the words of Morrison herself: "...and flying Africans, not stories, just people saying you know, flying before they came here...I did check on certain things about people who fly by reading those slave narratives. It was fascinating because everybody else had heard of that or saw, or knew somebody who saw it. ...So it was already there although it was after the fact" (Jones 144).

In the novel, the myth of the flying black man is eventually traced back to Milkman Dead's great grandfather Solomon. According to this myth, Solomon flies away from slavery with his infant son Jake, leaving behind his wife Ryna and their twenty odd children. In the story, it is further elaborated that Solomon flew too close to a tree and the baby slipped out from his arms, and thus Jake too was left behind. This incident marked the long rupture of his family's history. In tracing Milkman's ancestral roots to Solomon, Morrison also reveals to her readers that while the western myth of flight was one of flying towards freedom, the African American myth showed black men flying away from their responsibilities. While Solomon flew away from slavery, Milkman flew away from his responsibilities. Both men have indulged in 'flight' at the cost of their families; Solomon leaves behind his wife Ryna and their twenty one children, similarly Milkman too leaves his parents, sisters and his scorned lover Hagar in pursuit of his freedom and identity. Morrison reminds us of the women who have been left behind – Ryna and Hagar – and their inability to participate in such a journey. When Solomon left Ryna, she lost her mind and kept crying for the rest of her life. Ryna's absence from the Solomon story implies the exclusion of women from the myth: that a man can fly away to seek freedom and enlightenment whereas a woman has to remain in the restricted area of domestic life. Further, while the male ancestors' names are remembered and used in songs, the female ancestors have been forgotten. Ryna's story was not passed down along with the song of Solomon; instead, her name was given to a pining ghost-ridden ravine called Ryna's Gulch. Likewise, Hagar dies of despair, deserted by Milkman who is on a journey of self-discovery. Thus, the traditional male hero remains the focus in the mythical story and women cannot fully participate in the process of myth making which becomes the sole concern of black men.

In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison subverts the classical notion of the flight myth in bestowing Pilate, Milkman's aunt with the ability to fly even "[w]ithout ever leaving the ground" (SS 338), thus proclaiming that Pilate had already achieved her freedom and that there was no need for a physical manifestation of the same in the form of flight. And, as one who had achieved her personal freedom, Pilate was aware of her responsibility to pilot her own life. Thus, having taken control of her own life, she was also able to 'pilot' others around her. Further, Morrison provides Pilate geographical mobility something equivalent to what men are bestowed with under normal circumstances.

She begins her wanderings at a very young age not by way of choice but when she and her brother Macon were forcibly evicted from their prosperous farm by a powerful white family in a land grab scheme. After parting ways with her brother over the killing of an old white man and three bags of gold, she continues her journey alone to Virginia. Despite her nomadic life, she engages in formal education and had it not been for the child molesting preacher she would have continued with her studies. She then learns geography and lessons of life on the road through experience. She begins "the wandering life that she kept up for the next twenty-some-odd years, and stopped only after Reba had a baby" (SS 148). So, while Milkman had knowledge about his flying ancestor and he goes out in search of him, Pilate had no such parallel to follow except for Ryna's wailing.

However, what Pilate gathers through her wanderings is the acquisition of values that will eventually suffice not only Milkman but the entire black community. But she is able to do so not before surmounting numerous difficulties. An outsider in her own community right from the mysterious circumstances of her birth wherein she had "come struggling out of the womb without help" (SS 27), she was also shunned as she was born without a navel, a "belly that looked like a back" (SS 148). This in turn forces her to refuse marriage with her lover; she knows she cannot "hide her stomach from a husband forever" (SS 147) and it is the fear of rejection when he would find out that makes her decline his proposal of marriage. "It isolated her. Already without family, she was further isolated from her people, for, except for the relative bliss on the island, every other resource was denied her: partnership in marriage, confessional friendship, and communal religion. Men frowned, women whispered and shoved their children behind them" (SS 148). She is not only rejected by society but by her own family as well. Milkman and his father, Macon Dead are ashamed to consider Pilate their kin. Their rejection of Pilate is primarily because she does not have their social class.

However, Pilate is undeterred by the rejection she constantly faces. Born without a navel, Pilate comes to understand that she is different from others. Though this lack brings her rejection and her consequent isolation, she refuses to allow it to mar her life. She converts the rejection she faces into compassion which she showers on those who are alienated like her, accepting herself and others as she finds them. This ostracism also infuses in her the refusal to conform to convention merely for acceptance from others. And the first step she takes in this direction is to "...[throw] away every assumption she had learned and began at zero. First off, she cut her hair. That was one thing she didn't want to have to think about anymore. Then she tackled the problem of trying to decide how she wanted to live and what was valuable to her" (SS 149). In cutting her hair, Pilate displays her refusal to fit into the traditional and cultural notion of femininity. In fact, there was nothing particularly feminine about Pilate. Everything about her including her appearance was unconventional like her life. Pilate reveals a self which is not determined by physical appearance conforming to white standards of beauty. Here, she is different from the women in her family especially her granddaughter Hagar and her sister-in-law Ruth Foster Dead, both of whom have cultivated habits and attitudes of the dominant culture. The dissolution and erosion of black cultural values and black sensibilities is evident in these women; they have moved away from their black cultural heritage. On the contrary, Pilate develops her own moral strength, emerging as a self-delivered and self-sustaining figure of archetypal proportions. Unfortunately, she is unable to pass this wisdom to the community of women around her that is her immediate family. Morrison describes Ruth and Pilate in the following way:

"They were so different, these two women. One black, the other lemony. One corseted, the other buck naked under her dress. One well read but ill travelled. The other had read only a geography book, but had been from one end of the country to another. One wholly dependent on money for life, the other indifferent to it. But those were the meaningless things. Their similarities were profound. Both were vitally interested in Macon Dead's son, and both had close and supportive posthumous communication with their fathers" (SS 139).

While Ruth flaunts her class, Pilate does not belong to one. She chooses to live a simple, unpretentious life unlike her affluent elder brother Macon Dead and she ends up a bootlegger much to his chagrin again. She forsakes all the middle class trappings as is evident from her house outside the town which does not have even the basic amenities required for a decent existence. The important question for Pilate was "When am I happy and when am I sad and what is the difference? What do I need to know to stay alive? What is true in the world" (SS 149). It is this introspection that gives her

life-sustaining qualities and she comes to realize the importance of nurturing as is suggested in her generous hospitality to others. Pilate represents selfless love untouched by a superior sense of self or with material concerns.

Pilate's decision to start at zero also reveals the significance she attaches in returning to the past and reclaiming her ancestral history. It is this importance that she attaches to her roots which propels her into becoming a pilot, a guide to others, a person in tune with the natural humanity in those around her. And it is this role that Pilate fulfills towards Milkman, in guiding him to finding his ancestral roots. It is Milkman's fascination with the dream of flight that propels him into undertaking the quest to trace his ancestral roots. Though it is gold that is foremost on his mind for the quest, it gradually transforms into a spiritual journey to discover his identity. Initially, as a young boy of four, his discovery that only birds and airplanes could fly made him indifferent not only to other people's lives but also to his own. The spiritual significance of the myth of flight dawns on him only when he undertakes his journey to Shalimar, the birth place of his grandparents. Earlier, in the opening lines of the novel, Morrison narrates the failed "flight" of Robert Smith from the roof of Mercy Hospital the day prior to Milkman's birth. This event for many reflects unproductive and meaningless violence which does not help alleviate the racial and economic oppression that prevents Smith from claiming his African American identity. But for Pilate who was present at the scene, it reminded her of her ancestral past prompting her to break into singing the ballad "*O Sugarman done fly away Sugarman done gone Sugarman cut across the sky Sugarman gone home...*" (SS 6). For Pilate, the song was not simply about an African who flew back home but more importantly, it was about who she was and where she came from. In short, she sang about her roots. Later, Milkman carries out Robert Smith's failed attempt to fly and thereby confronts the exclusion of African Americans from the possibility of flight. He is redeeming not only Smith's failure but suggesting the recovery of African American cultural values which he acquires at Shalimar. In this mythical place, Milkman bonds with the locals who are fond of hunting, an ancient practice of Africa which once again connects him to the past and his roots. It is during one such hunting expedition that Milkman hears his great grandmother's name, Ryna, for the first time. Also, it is during this journey that Milkman comes to understand that a woman's heroic and nurturing survival is as important as a man's heroic flight; that if it was not for the nurturing and love given by women like Pilate there would be no cultural survival and preservation. He realizes that he has ignored the subjectivity of women and simply used them to satisfy his vanity and needs. He finally acknowledges the importance of maternal assistance, thus becoming a part of the nurturing tradition of African Americans and fully able to achieve the freedom of flight.

Pilate is a revolutionary figure and unlike the biblical connotation of her name, as one who condemns and kills Christ, she acts as a “pilot” to people around her. Morrison has deliberately created Pilate differently, so as to distinguish her from other characters by attributing to her the unique characteristic of being a self-made woman. First, she was noticed because of her atypical physical feature as one without a navel. However, later she is noticed more because of her healing powers and her sympathy for others. It is her selfless life that holds her steadfast without yielding to oppression which was a constant feature right from her childhood. Her introspection leads her to be caring and giving towards others; she understands the importance of compassion and nurturing, as is suggested in her impartial hospitality to others. “She gave up, apparently, all interest in table manners or hygiene, but acquired a deep concern for and about human relationships” (SS 149). It is these qualities that turn Pilate into a special person who throws away every cultural and social assumption and convention she has learned.

Further, through Pilate, Morrison seeks to reconstruct myths by giving voice to ordinary people and shedding light on the contribution of black women in maintaining community and establishing identity. In this regard, Pilate becomes a mythologized figure herself. For in the words of Joseph Campbell, “When a person becomes a model to other people’s lives, he has moved into the sphere of being mythologized” (20). Pilate has achieved this status and it is acknowledged by Milkman at the end of the novel when he utters on her death, “There must be another one like you... There’s got to be at least one more woman like you” (336). Through Pilate, Morrison seeks to transform the black community and also wants to make black men like Milkman realize the nurturing power of black women that eventually sustains them and the black community at large. She serves as the catalyst whose inspired visions of the past give them supernatural insight into the present and the future. Pilate is also responsible for initiating Milkman into African-American aesthetics and values and into their integrated unity which in turn is crucial for their survival.

***Tar Baby* and African American Patriarchal Myths**

In *Tar Baby*, Morrison weaves both myths and legends that are predominant in African American culture. The tar baby myth provides the backdrop for the novel and it becomes the central trope of the novel as the main characters Jadine and Son must confront one another’s perception of the ‘tar baby’. The original folktale narrates a white farmer who sets a trap for the rabbit by creating a tar baby. The rabbit escapes the clutches of the tar baby by asking to be thrown into the briar patch, where his survival skills have no match as he was born and bred there. This version of the folktale implies Jadine as the tar baby created by the dominant culture to lure blacks like Son who are steeped in their tradition. But other interpretations are also possible. It is equally possible to read

Son as a tar baby for Jadine as he is keen to trap black women like her into the ancient traditional ways of black femininity. Son, unlike Milkman, is grounded in his roots and therefore is connected to his past. He is a blend of what is natural and mythical. For him, rootedness is more important than mobility. As a repository of black culture and resistance to the white Western culture, Son's notion of black womanhood is "a certain fetishization of women as signs of an authentic cultural identity in the name of tradition" (Goyal 407). He can only associate with those women who are as rooted as he is in his culture, like the "pie ladies" in the church basement or the black women in his hometown Eloë. And it is with this intention that he takes Jadine to Eloë, hoping to get her in touch with her "ancient properties" but it only distances Jadine further from him. Eloë represents the traditional Africa and Jadine finds herself at odds with the community there. In this place women engage in both men's and women's work; men are free from domestic housekeeping and they are able to spend more time in pursuing masculine activities. Son too treats her with a parochial attitude when he is at Eloë becoming and displaying typical male behavior. Thus, his idea of *femininity* is traditional and time bound and he finds Jadine a complete contrast to his notion of womanhood. She is self-reliant and unfettered, one who resists the rigid gender roles that Son attempts to force on her. She aspires to be something other than the traditional black woman. So, Son considering himself a custodian of black culture, takes it on himself to rescue Jadine from cultural unconsciousness just as the night men of the island had saved the island's blacks. The patriarchal nature of the community becomes evident to Jadine when Soldier, one of the black men at Eloë, questions her on the equation shared between Son and Jadine; whether it was Son or Jadine who was in control of their relationship. Her doubts are further confirmed when the women of Eloë alienate her for her liberated and independent attitude. Further, it is at Eloë that Jadine encounters the mythical night women representing traditional black womanhood. Jadine is confronted by their nightmarish vision, one in which "they pull out a breast and showed it to her" (TB 260). Black women are willing nurturers and the night women in revealing their breasts wanted to carry out the nurturing function for Jadine as she lacks it. Son too tries to impose the mythic qualities of ancient African women on Jadine who rebels against them. She finds herself totally disconnected with the mythic tree women and understands them differently. She feels that the women taunt her with their femininity and for her vacuousness. It also dawns on Jadine that for the women of Eloë and the night women the only proper role for women is that of nurturers and reproductive agents. But it is this very role that she rejects, refusing to "settle for wifely competence when she could be almighty, to settle for fertility rather than originality, nurturing instead of building" (TB 269). Jadine rebuffs the cultural demands made on her and desires to be a different kind of woman. According to Trudier Harris, "it is easy to be unsympathetic to Jadine" because "African-American folk culture

has not prepared us well for a female outlaw” (128). Jadine aligns herself with an alternate tradition in which modernity and hybridity were the markers for a woman who had made it in the real world. She seeks neither to be a repository nor a transmitter of black culture, and she will not have it imposed on her.

From the outset Jadine’s and Son’s interactions reveal a fierce contest between their mutually conflicting ideals. Son, the black man in tune with his black heritage, mocks and berates Jadine, the modern, “culturally orphaned” black woman for being completely out of sync with her black roots. The ideals of the black world that Son inhabits makes him want to take control of Jadine and her *femininity* on the pretext of bringing her back into the black cultural fold. If Valerian Street, Jadine’s white benefactor, is accused of creating her on the dominant culture’s principles, then, Son is equally guilty of attempting to remake Jadine in his own image of black femininity. He accuses her of being like the tar baby of the folktale, a creature molded by the farmer to catch Brer Rabbit. Jadine, on the other hand finds the images of black femininity that Son cherishes a tar baby trap. The vision, instead of bringing Jadine closer to her heritage frightens her and hastens her retreat from Eloë. She finds these older, nurturing women in the night vision coming in the way of realizing her dreams.

She has to work through for herself their significance. According to her, the night women are there for her to acknowledge and not necessarily to re-enact. Jadine is a modern, independent woman and she sees the night women and the tree women as presences that aim to annihilate the very “person she had worked hard to become” (TB 264). Morrison could also be suggesting that black women in their search for financial security and independence may be taking on patriarchal values. Jadine is striving for equality which she tries to achieve in terms of material gains. As put forward by Simon de Beauvoir, “Thus the independent woman of today is torn between her professional interests and the problems of her sexual life; it is difficult for her to strike a balance between the two; if she does, it is at the price of concessions, sacrifices, acrobatics, which require her to be in a constant state of tension” (57). For Jadine, the choice is not one of choosing between her professional or sexual life but that of choosing between either realising her goals or to discover the traditional and collective strength and values of African American women.

When Son is not able to tame Jadine emotionally, he resorts to physical means to prevent her from leaving him. Initially she struggles against his seductive influences but he finally succeeds in getting her to give in, in the stereotypical manner common to white girls. As a natural man, he is inclined to exercise his sexual prowess but with the intention of wanting Jadine to accept a passive role. According to Simon de Beauvoir, Son is a typical male who “views the bed as the proper terrain for asserting

his aggressive superiority. He is eager to take and not to receive, not to exchange but to rob. He seeks to possess the woman to an extent over and above what she gives him; he demands that her consent be a defeat and that the words she murmurs be avowals he tears from her – demands that she confess her pleasure and recognize her subjection” (51). This means of “phallic domination” is also to prevent professional women like Jadine from pursuing a career and to repress female ambitions in order to allow the patriarchal society to maintain its hold on such women. He is unable to look beyond the nurturing role of women. Son wants Jadine to give up her life in the fast lanes of New York and go live in some other place. But Jadine is equally adamant on staying on in the city and making it in the white world thus condemning Son to staying “in that medieval slave basket” that was Eloë.

Jadine and Son’s relationship is doomed because both represent different ideals, one holds on to the past and the other to the future; each a culture carrier in a different way: “Mama –spoiled black man, will you mature with me? Culture –bearing black woman, whose culture are you bearing?” (TB 272). Jadine does not share Son’s perception of the past and she feels it is better to abort the past. He believes that one’s “ancient properties” are a must to uphold communal spirit and is thus completely locked in the past. In an interview to Charles Ruas, Morrison highlights the implications of Son’s limitation: “If he decides not to join the twentieth century and would join these men, he locks himself up forever from the future. He may identify totally and exclusively with the past, which is a kind of death, because it means you have no future, but a suspended place” (237). In being completely tied to Eloë, which exists only as a past, Son is failing to connect with the present or the future.

Jadine, on the contrary, looks for a conception of self that is beyond racial and sexual stratification where she desires to “get out of my skin and be only the person inside – not American – not black – just me” (TB 48). She works against the normative formulations of black womanhood and is annoyed with Son “for pulling that black woman-white-woman shit on me...if you think you can get away telling me what a black woman is or ought to be” (TB 121). Jadine seeks to go beyond the constraints of race and gender and in this Morrison is critiquing the gendered principles that dominate black patriarchy. Jadine’s rejection of feminine roles are a means of resistance to being racially and sexually exploited. She comes to realize that the women in the real world including Ondine, Rosa, Therese, the African woman along with the mythic night women and swamp women hanging from the trees are all tar babies, with the intention of making things stick, the very quality that Jadine is attempting to reject. The stereotypes produced by the real and mythical women only serve to suppress African American female subjectivity. The stereotypical roles assigned to black women

are those of daughters and mothers who are nurturers and culture bearers. This reduction of the black women to a domestic image is done with the intention of controlling and limiting them to the private space of home and family. The patriarchal society maneuvered and imposed on black women the ideals of black womanhood and black femininity which emphasized obedience and docility.

In the novel, Morrison is attempting to reconstruct a new folktale which can accommodate female experiences by revealing a female subjectivity. She deviates from the original tar baby story giving a voice to Jadine who could be the embodiment of a modern black woman in search of her roots as well as financial independence. Morrison is also bringing to the fore, the need to accommodate mythic archetypes to modern realities or else there is always the fear of losing women like Jadine to the master culture. Here she is similar in her ideas to Campbell who was also of the opinion that "...myths offer life models. But the models have to be appropriate to the time in which you are living, and our time has changed so fast that what was proper fifty years ago is not proper today" (16). In giving Jadine a voice in constructing a new myth, Morrison is seeking to bring in cultural transformation. She is of the opinion that the past can co-exist with the present and that it need not be discarded in the name of progress.

Conclusion

In the two novels under consideration in the paper, Morrison exposes the extreme positions of black women in mythology; they are either completely excluded the ancient stories or if they are mentioned, it is only in traditional roles as nurturers or reproductive agents. She reveals the inadequacies of ancient myths to enable black women to overcome their challenged positions of inferiority and oppression. Morrison seeks to revise and demystify the dominant classical and African American myths which reduce black women to the marginal status. In both *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*, she attempts to reconstruct the time-honoured themes in ancient myths to make them more appropriate and suitable to black women's oppressed situation recovering their subjectivity and bringing about a sense of identity, community and survival.

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