CHAPTER FIVE

ANALYSIS OF “SONG OF SOLOMON”
5.0. Preliminaries

Published in 1977, Song of Solomon is considered by many to be one of Toni Morrison’s masterpieces. Although the novel’s complex poses considerable difficulty to readers, the book’s literary merits place it in the ranks of Afro-American’s finest novels.

Toni Morrison won the 1978 National Critics Circle Award for fiction and the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Award for Song of Solomon.

Song of Solomon features the entire lives of many more characters than The Bluest Eye or Sula. The novel presents the effects of middle-class values on black families as well as an exploration of African-American culture and myth that depict the conceptual notion of the ethnic experience. Toni Morrison expounds the tribulations of black American life mentioned in The Bluest Eye and Sula, and investigates another vital dimension of the black experience – the effects of white middle-class values upon the inter-relationship of blacks who adopt them.

While Toni Morrison’s novel Song of Solomon has generally been critiqued as a novel concerning the identity formation of the male protagonist, it can also be read with an understanding of trauma and its
relationship to feminism, psychoanalysis, and race studies. To that end, this thesis seeks to scrutinize the female characters in *Song of Solomon* by examining the effects of racism and gender discrimination on female characters.

### 5.1. Plot Construction

Robert Smith, an insurance agent, in an unnamed Michigan town, leaps off the roof of Mercy Hospital wearing blue silk wings and claiming that he will fly to the opposite shore of Lake Superior. Mr. Smith plummets to his death. The next day, Ruth Foster Dead, the daughter of the first black doctor in town, gives birth to the first black child born in Mercy Hospital, Milkman Dead.

Discovering at age four that humans cannot fly, young Milkman loses all interest in himself and others. He grows up nourished by the love of his mother and his aunt, Pilate. He is taken care of by his sisters, First Corinthians and Magdalene (called Lena), and adored by his lover and cousin, Hagar. Milkman does not reciprocate their kindness and grows up bored and privileged. In his lack of compassion, Milkman resembles his father, Macon Dead II, a ruthless landlord who pursues only the accumulation of wealth.
Milkman is afflicted with a genetic malady, an emotional disease that has its origins in oppressions endured by past generations and passed on to future ones. Milkman’s grandfather, Macon Dead, received his odd name when a drunk Union soldier erroneously filled out his documents (his grandfather’s given name remains unknown to Milkman). Eventually, Macon was killed while defending his land. His two children, Macon Jr. and Pilate, were irreversibly scarred by witnessing the murder and became estranged from each other. Pilate has become a poor but strong and independent woman, the mother of a family that includes her daughter, Reba, and her granddaughter, Hagar. In contrast, Macon Jr. spends his time acquiring wealth. Both his family and his tenants revile him.

By the time Milkman reaches the age of thirty-two, he feels stifled living with his parents and wants to escape to somewhere else. Macon Jr. informs Milkman that Pilate may have millions of dollars in gold wrapped in a green tarp suspended from the ceiling of her rundown shack. With the help of his best friend, Guitar Bains, whom he promises a share of the loot, Milkman robs Pilate. Inside the green tarp, Milkman and Guitar find only some rocks and a human skeleton. We later learn that the skeleton is that of Milkman’s grandfather, Macon Dead I. Guitar is especially disappointed not to find the gold because he needs the funds
to carry out his mission for the Seven Days, a secret society that avenges injustices committed against African-Americans by murdering innocent whites.

Thinking that the gold might be in a cave near Macon’s old Pennsylvania farm, Milkman leaves his hometown in Michigan and heads south, promising Guitar a share of whatever gold he finds. Before he leaves, Milkman severs his romantic relationship with Hagar, who is driven mad by his rejection and tries to kill Milkman on multiple occasions. After arriving in Montour County, Pennsylvania, Milkman discovers that there is no gold to be found. He looks for his long-lost family history rather than for gold. Milkman meets Circe, an old midwife who helped deliver Macon Jr. and Pilate. Circe tells Milkman that Macon’s original name was Jake and that he was married to an Indian girl, Sing.

Encouraged by his findings, Milkman heads south to Shalimar, his grandfather’s ancestral home in Virginia. Milkman does not know that he is being followed by Guitar, who wants to murder Milkman because he believes that Milkman has cheated him out of his share of the gold. While Milkman initially feels uncomfortable in Shalimar’s small-town atmosphere, he grows to love it as he uncovers more and more clues about his family history. Milkman finds that Jake’s father, his great-
grandfather, was the legendary flying African, Solomon, who escaped slavery by flying back to Africa. Although Solomon’s flight was miraculous, it left a scar on his family that has lasted for generations. After an unsuccessful attempt to take Jake, his youngest son, with him on the flight, Solomon abandoned his wife, Ryna, and their twenty-one children. Unable to cope without a husband, Ryna went insane, leaving Jake to be raised by Heddy, an Indian woman whose daughter, Sing, he married.

Milkman’s findings give him profound joy and a sense of purpose. Milkman becomes a compassionate, responsible adult. After surviving an assassination attempt at Guitar’s hands, Milkman returns home to Michigan to tell Macon Jr. and Pilate about his discoveries. At home, he finds that Hagar has died of a broken heart and that the emotional problems plaguing his family have not gone away. Nevertheless, Milkman accompanies Pilate back to Shalimar, where they bury Jake’s bones on Solomon’s Leap, the mountain from which Solomon’s flight to Africa began. Immediately after Jake’s burial, Pilate is struck dead by a bullet that Guitar had intended for Milkman. Heartbroken over Pilate’s death, but invigorated by his recent transformation, Milkman calls out Guitar’s name and leaps toward him.
5.2. Analysis of Song of Solomon

5.2.1. Feminist Analysis according to Race, Gender, Class and different oppositions

Bandler J. Michael (1979) says that Song of Solomon bridges the information gap between the black experience mirrored in legends and century-old history and the contemporary black generation that knows little about the glory amidst the tribulations.

Racism, actually in Song of Solomon, hovers in the background. But the actual presence of white America seldom intrudes upon the action in the novel. Most occurrences take place within the black community, and the characters’ mental development progresses as a result of their inner growth, or lack of it.

Song of Solomon narrates the saga of a black family, Ruth Foster, her husband Macon Dead and their children Milkman Dead, Corinthians and Lena. Ruth is contrasted to Pilate, an aunt of Milkman, whose daughter Reba and granddaughter Hagar lead free lives that contrast markedly with Ruth Foster’s daughters Corinthians Dead and Lena Dead. Ruth’s son Milkman Dead, the middle-class protagonist, must be measured against his friend Guitar who grows up impoverished and bitter.
Pilate’s line echoes the household of Eva Peace’s in *Sula*; there are three generations of free and roving women. Ruth, a doctor’s daughter, suffers from sterile, killing white values and patriarchal oppression sustained by her husband, Macon Dead. She is as elitist as her husband. As the only daughter of the most important Negro in the city, Dr. Foster, she has become accustomed to luxury all her life. Her father is a classic example of the black bourgeoisie. He does little to help the plight of his fellow blacks, regarding himself as having risen above them. Macon later says to his son that Negroes in this town worshipped him. He did not give a damn about them though and called them cannibals.

Though Milkman’s quest for his identity is dominant in the novel, the focus is on his mother, Ruth, and his aunt, Pilate, who are brilliantly contrasted with each other. Ruth is a society-lady, whereas Pilate is totally outside the society as symbolized by her house outside the town. The distinction that Morrison makes between class and community and between autonomy and self-absorption is represented by the towering figure of Pilate who is totally beyond class distinctions and yet is the embodiment of the spirit of her community. In making Ruth and Pilate come together, Morrison seems to suggest that the effect of class distinctions and the fragmentation of community may be overcome by women in their over-riding concern for the living.
Regarding gender, it is only after Milkman has revolutionized his consciousness regarding race oppression and class exploitation that he sheds his sexist views of women. Prior to this increased awareness, Milkman had been milking the life out of women. Pissing on Lena, squealing on first Corinthians, spying on Ruth, stealing from Pilate, and murdering Hagar are evidences of Milkman’s low level of consciousness. At the time he committed these acts, he was not aware of that oneness which connects African people.

Although Morrison does not focus primarily on the relationship of gender to class in *Song of Solomon*, she does integrate that concern into her major theme. As the daughter of the only black doctor in the town, Ruth is bred to an upper middle-class existence. She is presented in the novel as the underside of the ideal southern lady image. She is totally cut off from life, benevolently imprisoned by her father who tries to make her into his girl-doll, spitefully contained by her husband who marries her because of her class position, then despised by him for her inherent weakness. Ruth’s life is one of uneventful waste, interrupted only by the birth of her son, whom she tries to keep a baby as long as possible. Ruth is symbolic of the terror that awaits those women who become the emblem of a man’s wealth and class position.
While Ruth is the quintessence of the ideal southern lady image, Pilate is a woman completely outside societal structures. She is the guide in the novel to essences beyond outward appearance or material things. Pilate is also the embodiment of the tradition of her family and is the pilot for Milkman in his necessary journey to the past. Morrison compared and contrasted these two women. She says that they were so different from each other. One was black and the other one was lemony. One was 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 was wholly dependent on money for life and the other was indifferent to it. However, 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. They come together in the novel, the upper-class lady and the conjure woman to save Milkman who in a sense, is the symbol of their community.

From Pilate, Milkman receives abundant love. Wallowing in it, Milkman feels for the first time in his life that he remembered being completely happy, most important, it is because of Pilate that he steered in a conscious direction. Though her acknowledgement of dignity in and
pride of her Africanness, despite her lack of material wealth. Milkman gets his first lesson in race and class-consciousness.

Milkman like Pilate, must learn to respect his African self and to realize that money does not ensure happiness. It was she who first forced him to confront his identity as the living dead sucks the life force from his people and he learned from her the essence of life. What Milkman gave her in return for life was the murder of her daughter and the theft of her father.

Pilate’s role in the novel is dialectically related to Milkman’s developing consciousness. When Milkman first saw her, she was sitting with one foot pointing east and one west: east points to Africa and its culture and thus, to Milkman’s present and future. Pilate symbolizes the bridge that connects the two. She becomes the source, the base from which Milkman must build his race and class-consciousness.

The story of Ruth is full of overwhelming bereavement over the death of her father and her loss of sexual fulfillment from her husband. She holds her husband responsible for her father’s death. Her rendition is that although her father was not a good man, and although she was “pressed small” by living in that house surrounded by its bigness and the bigness of his ideas, she had only knelt by her father’s bedside at his death and kissed his fingers. Finger was the only part of his body that
was not deformed by the disease. Her father has had as much control on her life and she surrendered it all under the taint of his memory. Her husband Macon’s story is vivid with images of sexual defilement – and it is because he believes he saw Ruth naked in bed with her father’s bloated and diseased body that he refused to touch her and renew their sexual intimacy. Ruth’s father insured in his stingy and malicious living and the ugliness of his dying that his daughter and her husband would never be free of his perverted values and able to separate themselves from the ugliness of his memory.

Ruth’s daughters, Magdalene and first Corinthians, labour under this memory as well. They were brought up as Ruth was. Ruth’s only memories of other children were not as playmates but as children who wanted to touch her dresses and white silk stockings. Her daughters became women who were as much objects as was their mother. We find them eternally infantile – their work of crafting the velvet pieces into roses for a department store occupies them through their childhood and into their adulthood, they were raised to be childlike brides.

Corinthian’s escape from her father’s house took her back to a traditional black woman’s role-maid to a white woman. It was as if this step backwards, away from the pseudo-life-designed reality, and made the potential of her coming to touch herself as a woman a possibility.
The work allowed her to meet and love Henry Porter. Again, the white connection serves as a sort of catalyst.

A college educated woman having to assume the position of a maid and lie to her parents that she is an amanuensis, illustrates that the psychological and social abuse suffered and endured by black women who work in these roles, subjugating their pride for some personal goal. Corinthian’s goal of escape is the antithesis of the “correct” man. Even her brother was appalled when he discovered she was involved with Porter, whom he knew to be a member of the Seven Days. But we find him not making much effort to protect his sister as it is an effort to reserve his reputation in the town.

Through Corinthian’s connection with Henry Porter, we can say that she received an education and European travel, but there is no man that her parents deem worthy as a marriage partner for her. She was also rejected by ambitious young black men who wanted a strong, upwardly mobile spouse, not a pampered flower. She became a maid to a spiritually vacuous, repulsive old white woman. Corinthian also discovered her own ego at the age of forty-two.

She is a perfect example of educated Ivy League daughter who is to use her class and learning only as a persona, as a decoration for her family. Further proof of her status as family property is her brother’s
attempt to stop her from relating with the “unworthy” Porter. He tried to
round her back up and into the family’s treasury of prestigious objects.
In the novel she is expected to live her life in abeyance until the
acceptable man to her family comes along.

Corinthians could no longer live out her parents’ fantasies, and she
settled for the very unkind, harsh, probably psychotic Henry Porter
rather than for living as a vestal virgin.

Corinthians’ strike for freedom and her role towards her life style,
they gave Lena the courage to confront her brother Milkman with the
staleness of his life and his selfishness. She accuses him for being
selfish. They were like his servants in the house. She said to him that
their girlhood was spent like a found nickel on him. When he slept, they
were quiet; when he was hungry, they cooked for him, when he wanted
to play, they entertained him; and when he got grown enough to know
the difference between a woman and a two-toned Ford, everything in the
house stopped for him. He has never asked them if they were tired, or
sad, or wanted a cup of coffee.

Lena’s speech with Milkman gathers women’s deepest resentments
against men, heroes or not, berating her brother for his pampered
arrogance, his notions of domestic noblesse, his obtuse chauvinism and
his utter insensitivity to his sisters’ suppressed lives. Her speech was a
message that liberates her. Her speech made it clear that Milkman has no
right to decide their lives.

5.2.2. Analysis of Black Female Characters in the novel

Milkman’s sisters are the women who suddenly individuate towards
opposite poles as they approach middle age. Lena was a caretaker of her
mother. Corinthians chooses to define herself in terms of a man, but both
characters have less than satisfying relationships with their men. These
two sisters’ egos will always be grounded in a childhood filled with cruel
images of relatedness; their beginnings were framed by a bitter reality of
entrapping relationships. They have been allowed no privacy,
independence or autonomy. In a way Lena and Corinthians are retarded,
but in another and deeper way, they are bitterly aware of the stinging salt
of existence of the misery human life can hold. Their egos will never
drowse in the unconscious selfishness that so sustained the younger
Milkman’s ego.

Pilate, Reba and Hagar are the other half of the women in this
novel. They are qualitatively different from the ineffectual doctor’s
daughters. These are women of substance and sustenance. It is as if their
removal from males has forced the awakening of the potential within
feminine bonding and assured them their health. Insulated in Pilate’s
fertile home, their strength is intact. Outside of his home, however, the fragility of their exclusive unity is exposed to a world that needs the strength of a family and community, complete and healthy, to survive.

Morrison has tried to assure Pilate’s survival by making her womanhood an intense acknowledgment of its own completeness. Whenever Pilate is present, we are overwhelmed with the strength that her stature commands. Milkman sees this once, when Pilate grows to a regal stature, reminiscent of an African queen. This vision awes him and commands his respect for the woman who was responsible for his birth.

Pilate was a kind of person who was alone, but yearns for a community. She was whole but bereft of her legacy. She was poor but emotionally rich.

There was an important imagery in Pilate’s home. It was natural and fertile. Children were offered eggs to eat which are symbols of the feminine dominion in the household. The home had a fertility odour, more imagery of the womb, and the women fiercely protected their solidarity. These women gained strength from each other. They survived because their womanhood had not been violated. While Lena and Corinthians had to deal with the bitterest faces of the masculine – a cruel father, an indifferent brother and for Corinthians a literal killer-lover – their cousin Hagar had an insulted and pampered childhood. Hagar and
Reba grew strong in coping with harsh reality of their home life. It was Hagar who was most exploited by Milkman. While she genuinely loved Milkman, he loved her solely as a receptacle in which to empty his lust, considering her his private honey pot. Milkman’s treatment of Hagar makes him a heinous character in the readers’ eyes. She gave him all her love, unconditionally and absolutely, telling herself that he would marry her some day. But Milkman treated her like a wad of chewing gum. This broke Hagar’s heart. She almost lost her mind and finally died a wretched death. He sadly failed to see the tragedy and sacrifice implicit in Hagar’s poignant death. What we understand here is that it was excitement and passion he looks for in Hagar, not steadfast love. On the other hand, Hagar recognized in her relationship with Milkman a certain permanency and gave all her devotion. She committed herself into his care, but Milkman avoided commitment and strong feelings.

Morrison says that at the age of twenty-three Hagar dreamed of a Prince Charming who would change her life. Hagar did not want to be unattached and floating like Reba and Pilate. She grew up completely surrounded by a chaotically feminine yet providing world. She never had to strive for anything. Like Sula she never had to carry any responsibility. She apparently did not work although she did help with the wine-making sometimes. She was able to spend her life drifting
because Pilate and Reba see themselves as the providers for her. They obviously loved her to distraction as seen in her funeral when they sang her back to themselves, internalized her as their baby, their “sugar bumpkin”. But, for all the poignancy of this matriarchal tender love for its own, Hagar was dead. Ironically, their totally noncontingent and supportive love might have taken from her the development of the strength she needed to survive Milkman’s abandoning her. Also missing in her life were male relatives to help build her animus, her sense of the way to deal with men. When Pilate tried to make her see Milkman as a cousin or brother, Hagar immediately seduced him. She saw him as one more gift from her mothers for her self-indulgence. As she gained maturity, she projected the total spirituality of the masculine onto Milkman, making him carry a divine animus, her soul. Without him, she felt she would lose her grounding in the feminine world, in the world itself even. She is like Sula vis-à-vis Ajax. When Hagar was at age thirty-six she was still a girl. She did not track the irrevocable linear passage of time and could not believe that she had given nineteen years of her life to Milkman and that he could write her off. She thought that she could metamorphose back into a perfect young girl. She tried for rebirth by simply changing her exterior, her personality. When Guitar
found her on the last murder attempt, she sat holding her breasts like rejected fruit, sensing herself as the barren yet vegetative feminine.

Hagar did not really know how to assert herself because she was so pampered. She did not know how to assert herself except by murdering the demonic and rejecting masculine or repackaging her body. We can say she was terribly “over mothered”, calling both Reba and Pilate “Mother”.

Pilate beat Hagar, a thirty-six year old woman, when she tried to kill Milkman. Everyone in the community saw her as the two women’s daughter. She looked like Pilate and reflected Pilate’s creative energy in the wild growth of her hair, but she did not have Pilate’s strength for going it alone. She died close to the advent of middle age, dolled up like a young girl. In fact, Hagar’s mothers had only good will towards her. But by totally protecting Hagar as a symbol of the future of their line, as their baby, Pilate and Reba might have unwittingly participated in her destruction. There can be three other elements present in her demise. The first one is Hagar’s own temperament. Second is Milkman’s cynical indifference towards her and third the commercial values of American culture. But there is a missing aspect in her and that is the strength which comes to women from the ardour of either raising children or working to support oneself. It can be assessed in Sula’s death the same way as
Hagar. When an author like Toni Morrison uses the same pattern twice, one can understand she means it.

In these women of the younger generation – Lena, Corinthians and Hagar – Morrison used life-stage boundaries to delineate character change and growth. The women exploded out of the niches others had made for them, individuating in killing ways, but nevertheless insisting on change. Their explosion further Milkman’s individuation; he, as his father’s delegate, tried to force Corinthians to give up Henry Porter but she escaped. Then Lena told him of his selfishness. Hagar killed herself and Pilate gave Milkman Hagar’s hair, saying that he must carry his guilt.

All the women in Song of Solomon gave primary importance to Milkman. They did everything for him. For example, Ruth gave him undivided attention, Pilate treated him as her son she never had. To Hagar, his lover, he was the centre of her life, her body and her affection. Even in the end when Pilate died in his arms, she instructed him about caritas, love of all humans. Even Corinthians and Lena served their brother Milkman. These women are 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.
Despite of Pilate’s abandonment by her brother and lovers and shunned by neighbours, she overcame adversity and rejection without recrimination or self-pity. Resourceful and independent, she scorned civilized creature comforts. With a satisfying life for herself, Reba and Hagar, she protected herself and those she cared for in times of crisis, as when she rescued Reba from the abusing lover. No passive woman, she intercedes when occasion warrants, helping the desperate Ruth to conceive and deliver Milkman. But unlike matriarchal Eva Peace of *Sula* – after Milkman’s birth it only took her brother’s signal for Pilate to walk away from his house bearing no resentment, jealousy. Pilate had respect for other people’s privacy.

Pilate hungered not for family dynasty, for domestic respectability, for the authority of some Big House Mammy, or even for others’ regard. Her heroism resides in her self-acceptance and self-content.
5.3. Conclusion

Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* highlights on the manner in which equation of Power and the levels of class, gender and race operate in a literary work with the help of characters such as Ruth Foster’s black family. The novel provides an interesting instance of the feminism, racist, capitalist, even patriarchal, strategies which display a marked interrelatedness in their attempts to culturally destabilize subordinated groups. Myths of superiority of the dominating groups over the dominated are created by promoting ideologies that have their basis in hierarchical distinctions of colour, class, sex, caste and religion.

It is important to say despite of the growth of Toni Morrison’s writing of *Song of Solomon*, her immaturity of understanding that while the Africans are exploited both racially and economically, their economic exploitation forms the basis of their national oppression. Kwane Nkrumah (1970) said that while capitalist exploitation and race oppression are complementary, the removal of the first ensures the removal of the other.

In *Song of Solomon* Morrison makes a critique on a patriarchal society, which devalues women. While some would characterize the text as a novel about the loss of fathers, it can be contended that it is rather about the effect the loss has on the psyche of the women left behind.
At the conclusion of the novel, men have inherited the ability to fly. Men lose and in return they leave. The women, however, remain stationary. They remain tied to the land, tied to their children. They are left to pass on the stories, sing the songs, and mourn the men who have left them. In the end Hagar is left dead, and Ruth is shattered. Morrison does not offer her readers a happy ending to this story of love and loss of love. Rather she leaves us with one more woman being left. Before Pilate dies she tells Milkman to watch Reba for her, but Milkman does not. Whether he dies at the hands of Guitar or flies off like Solomon, Reba will be left alone. Having always depended on Pilate to care for her, one can only wonder what her testimony will be.