**Chapter - IV**

**Search for Roots**

...Land and soil, red soil and sweet gum tree
So scant of grass, so profligate of pines,
Now just before an epoch's sun declines
Thy sun, in time, I have returned to thee,
Thy sun, I have in time returned to thee.

- Jean Toomer, "Song of the son"

The *Street* (TS) and *The Women of Brewster Place* (TWOBP) have been examined as migration narratives where the migrants are grappling with the white urban power in the North. Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (SOS) comes back to the South after a journey from the South to the North. The circle is complete because both the text and the reader come back to the South. SOS, one of Morrison's most complex narratives, has Macon Dead II and Pilate migrating to the North from the South after their father is murdered by white men in the South. However, the novel has at its centre Milkman's journey back to the South in search of his family roots and manhood. It is interesting to note that Morrison chooses the son to make the search rather than any of the daughters of the novel, especially when contemporary women writers have focussed on the (grand) mother-daughter relation ship. Perhaps this choice may illustrate the dominant role of the female ancestor/mother in passing on cultural knowledge and
values to both male and female children in the family. Pilate, in this case, also reflects practices in many West African cultures, where the education of the children – until the boys’ initiation – was done by the women of the compound. Milkman, therefore, lives in a world in which women are the main sources of the knowledge he must gain, and Pilate Dead, his aunt, a larger-than-life character, is his guide to that understanding. Morrison herself, in one of the interviews conducted by Nellie, McKay says,

I chose the man to make that journey because I thought he had more to learn than a woman would have. I started with a man, and I was amazed at how little men taught one another in the book. I assumed that all men ever learn about being men they get from other men. So that the presence of Pilate, and the impact that all the other women had on Milkman’s life, came as a bit of a surprise to me. But it made it work out right, because there were two sets of information he needed to learn in order to become a complete human being. (428)

And as Morrison shows in the novel, Milkman learns one set of information from Pilate, and another set of information from Guitar. This kind of harmony between the two sets of information makes it possible for him to do something important. Milkman, the protagonist of SOS (1977), is one of those first generation city-born African Americans about whom Wright has talked in his 12 Million Black Voices, a documentary text.
However, Milkman is neither nationalist nor militant. Nor does he seek to gain a critical awareness of the forces that shape history, as do the ideal young men in the Wright text. He is comfortably middle class, spoiled, and rather self-indulgent.

Morrison's SOS can be positioned in the tradition of urban male narratives. Both Emmett Till and Malcolm X have cameo appearances in SOS. The former is introduced to initiate a dialogue about the precarious condition of black manhood. Upon hearing news of Till's murder the men in the barbershop begin,

... to trade tales of atrocities, first stories they had heard, then those they'd witnessed, and finally the things that had happened to themselves. A litany of personal humiliation, outrage, and anger turned sicklelike back to themselves as humor. They laughed then, uproariously, about the speed with which they had run, the pose they had assumed, the ruse they had invented to escape or decrease some threat to their manliness, their humanness. (SOS 82)

This is a conversation during which Milkman remains silent. His comfortable life has protected him from the experiences the men share; however, the conversation reveals to him and to the reader the impossibility of a black man returning to the South without risking his life.
Malcolm X is introduced to suggest an alternative to returning, the alternative of a militant black nationalism which seeks vengeance on white people for their inhuman action. When Guitar tells Milkman of his membership in a secret vigilante society; "the Seven Days", Milkman tells him, "You sound like that red-headed Negro named X. Why don't you join him and call yourself Guitar X?" (SOS 160). Morrison uses Till and X to situate the novel historically. The reference to Till tells us that at that point in the novel, we are in the year 1955. The reference to Malcolm X tells us that the novel is now in the early 1960s. We can measure Milkman's growth and development with the help of these historical events. More significantly however, these two historical figures serve as symbols of black manhood in America.

Morrison’s novel is about the quest for black manhood in the wake of the Black Power Movement. She reconsiders many of the concerns set forth in the narratives of Wright, Ellison, and Malcolm X. In so doing she redefines masculinity, making the connection that would have seemed stifling to the former, absolutely necessary for the achievement of manhood. Milkman does not suffer the fate of Emmett Till when he returns to the South. Instead, he does, like Malcolm X, make a spiritual journey and becomes the prey of another black man. However, the consequence of Milkman's journey is a redefinition for him of manhood that includes a less selfish, more nurturing component. He does not leave the United States for his
pilgrimage to his roots because his Mecca is the American South, where the earth is “soggy with black people’s blood” (SOS 158).

In this novel we have the synthesis of two perspectives. One emphasizing the importance of safe spaces in the achievement of wholeness and the other documenting the difficulty of accomplishing this for a black man in American society. Central to the achievement of a healthy manhood is the journey back and a sustained relationship with the ancestor. Both TS and TWOBP show the importance of safe spaces in the lives of its women characters. But they also show that the rejection or denial of such safe spaces could to a large extent lead to the failure of a migrant in the city. The characters in these two novels also face gender-specific difficulties in accomplishing their task. As the authors’ show black women also face sexual threat both from black and white men. Be it Lutie, Mattie, Ciel or Lorraine, all of them face a threat to their lives from their own black men.

In SOS the murder of a black person by a white mob is of major importance to the fate of all black people. Morrison spends little time detailing graphically the murder of the individual, Macon Dead I. However, the consequences of his murder are highly significant for his black neighbours and his progeny. Macon Dead had begun a new life by leaving the South after the Civil War and taking an epic journey to the North. Although he intends to go to a particular place, Boston, his inability to read signs lands him in Pennsylvania where for twelve years he develops a
farm, "Lincoln's Heaven" (SOS 51). Although he is eventually dispossessed of this land, Macon experiences a genuine conversion in the North. Lincoln's Heaven is the only fully safe place in the novel, the Eden of love and plenty, which is lost, when whites murder him for land. The murder of Macon Dead I forces the flight of his orphaned children and kills the spirit of the remaining black boys. Pilate, his daughter, goes farther South, where she knows she will find her history, her people, she will eventually become the elder of the text – as she is the one who embodies the wisdom and history of the ancestor. Macon II, his boy, goes to the city in an attempt to escape the violence of his past and to search for a spiritually empty but materialistic comfort.

Macon Dead I was the model of what a hardworking determined black man could accomplish if he owned land. Unlike his son, who strives to own property and people, to acquire money and status, the elder Dead wanted land to produce food for his family and to ensure stability and independence. He had a relationship with the land, and for the neighbouring blacks his success was no reason to envy him but instead served as inspiration and motivation:

Head and shoulders above all of it was the tall, magnificent Macon Dead, whose death, ... was the beginning of their own dying.... (He) was the farmer they wanted to be, the clever irrigator, the peach tree grower, the hog slaughterer, the wild turkey roaster,
the man who could plow forty in no time flat and sang
like an angel while he did it. He had come out of
nowhere, as ignorant as a hammer and broke as a
convict, with nothing.... Sixteen years later he had one
of the best farms in Montour County. A farm that ...
spoke to them like a sermon. ... Here, this here, is
what a man can do if he puts his mind to it and his
back in it. ... “Stop picking around the edges of the
world. Take advantage, and if you can't take
advantage, take disadvantage. ... Grab this land! Take
it, hold it, ... make it, ... shake it, squeeze it, turn it,
twist it, beat it, kick it, whip it, stamp it, dig it, plow it,
seed it, reap it, rent it, buy it, sell it, own it, build it,
multiply it, and pass it on-can you hear me? Pass it
on!” (SOS 235)

In this magnificent passage Morrison deconstructs the notion of
Jefferson’s pastoral agrarian vision of an America populated by
independent yeoman farmers. The sermon, seemingly spoken, in the voice
of the land, at first preaches “cast your buckets where you stand,” but the
brief powerful, “They shot his head off” (SOS 235) subverts that possibility
for a black man in a racist land.

However, the land, which in the works of the previous authors has been
portrayed as blood drenched and keeper of the shameful secret, is here
shown as an ally. “Stake your claim in me,” it says, “You have a right.” Macon Dead I and the land become one in the commands to the black community, embracing them with the term “we”. With the words “A farm that... spoke to them like a sermon,” Morrison suggests that though the land preaches the sermon, it is in the voice of Macon Dead. Here the land and the ancestor are conflated into one benevolent, protecting, and wise figure. Due to the orality of this passage, the text itself becomes the repository of the ancestor’s voice. Melvin Dixon tells us that the land has a “voice full of the language and cadence of Negro spirituals” (163). In TWOBP, Mattie had also come, from Tennessee, without anything except a baby, but eventually acts as a friend, nurturer and healer to the women of Brewster Place acting as a safe space to these women. The orality of the passage just quoted could be contrasted with the silence of the magnificent passage of the laying-on-of-hands ritual in TWOBP where Mattie plays the role of a healer and a nurturer.

The sermon is about the promise that Macon Dead I represented the promise that Blacks could also be the owners of the best farms with hard work, was murdered with him. It is also the promise that can be resurrected with the retelling of this tale. It reestablishes the African American birthright. There is no detailing of the blood or the gore; instead Morrison opens and closes this event with the shot that killed their dreams, the retelling of which in the early 1970s to Milkman, his grandson, nourishes the younger man. Milkman knows of the brutal
murder, but it is the other part of the story, which nourishes and
motivates him to continue his own quest. He knows that his grandfather
possessed qualities of manhood quite different from those he has
acquired. Like his aunt before him, he too seeks to acquire his
grandfather's qualities by travelling farther South. Neither Naylor nor
Petry have shown that a journey back to the South could lead to the
spiritual growth of a character. South, for both these writers, is still a
place of racial horror and shame, to which their characters cannot return.

The first lynching we hear of in SOS is the historically accurate 1955
murder of Emmett Till. The actual lynching of Emmett Till is linked to a
white woman: he allegedly whistles at a white woman and is lynched,
castrated and burned. The black men of the barbershop in SOS use Till's
lynching to reflect on their own positions in the white man's world, just as
Macon Dead's murder causes them to reflect on the role of the Southern
men around the store stoop. However, when Macon Dead is murdered,
there is no woman -- no white woman for him to desire, no black woman
for him to protect. There is land and the independence that comes with its
ownership. When female imagery is used symbolically to signify issues of
power and ownership it is the power and ownership of the black man and
not the white. It is quite significant that in Morrison's text the pivotal
murder of a black man is focussed not on sexuality but on land
ownership. The crux of the matter is that the threatening black man is not
a sexual threat; he is an economic threat. Manhood is about the
possession of economic and spiritual independence. In stressing the link between black economic self-sufficiency and lynching, Morrison is following Ida B. Wells, who at the turn of the century argued that lynching was "an excuse to get rid of Negroes who were acquiring wealth and property" (64).

Morrison offers an alternative definition of black manhood, one, which focusses not on the body but on the land, one which embraces the ancestor in its quest for new notions of black masculinity. She also explores and extends her meditation on history as she examines the effects of slavery and its aftermath on black America. The Dead family becomes a trope for those blacks who migrated to the North and Midwest in the wake of Reconstruction in order to escape from oppression and in search of freedom.

Macon and Pilate are brother and sister. Separated after their father's murder, each inherits something different from him. Macon II turns his father's love of the land and talent for farming into an obsessive desire for ownership of property, reducing land and people to mere commodities. The novel suggests that he lacks the organic connection to the soil. Which saved Macon I from the obsessive, dehumanising materialism that drives his son. Macon's primary goal is to amass a fortune and a business he can bequeath to his only son, Milkman, who is the most important person in his life. Macon I believes him to be the vehicle through which his empire,
his spirit, and thus his line will continue to live. He therefore essentially dismisses anyone who either obstructs or fails to contribute to his progress; his faith is in the acquisition of things not in the development of human relations. As he tells Milkman in childhood:

Come to my office. Work a couple of hours there and learn what’s real. Let me tell you right now the one important thing you’ll ever need to know: Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you’ll own yourself and other people too. (SOS 55)

The American Dream plays an important role in the life of Macon Dead I and he becomes almost insensitive to any relationship. In TS, too, Lutie is blinded by the American Dream in her attempt to improve her lifestyle. She too loses her husband, rejects the ancestral voice of grandmother, befriends Boots who will eventually be responsible for her failure. However, the difference between Macon and Lutie is obvious as the former acquires wealth and becomes a wealthy man whereas the latter struggles and fails. Petry is more concerned with the female experience in the city whereas Morrison’s concern is the male experience. To come back to the text, Macon’s eviction of Mrs. Bains reveals his insensitivity to his tenants, to him they are just so much property. This lack of sympathy is not confined to his business relationships. It extends to his family too. Macon brutalises his wife, Ruth, both subtly and overtly, because he suspects her of incestuous relationships with her father and her son. Macon has no use for his daughters, Lena and Corinthians. The two are introduced in the
novel as “half grown, scrambling about in the show trying to catch the red velvet rose petals” (SOS 5). The family treats these two women as if they were still children. The Macon Deads exemplify the patriarchal nuclear family which reminds one of Naylor in her portrayal of her characters: Mattie’s father, Eugene’s arrogance, C.C. Baker and his gang’s harassment of girls. The Two’ are also not spared because this lesbian relationship is a threat to patriarchy in its departure from dependence on men.

Macon refuses to acknowledge the existence also of his sister Pilate. His resentment is based in part on his belief that she has stolen some gold that the two of them should have shared. He also fears that the white bankers will cease to trust him if they associate him with a bootlegging woman. Pilate, just the opposite of Macon, owns herself – the physical evidence of her self-possession and self-creation is her stomach without a navel. She is an independent woman as she was born without anyone’s help. She interprets the one word uttered by her father’s ghost, a regular visitor, as an admonition for performance: “Sing”. Instead of acquiring property Pilate creates song, transmitting the family lore unconsciously. After her father is killed by white people, Pilate begins a “wandering life” for some twenty years, only to find out that her physical uniqueness “isolated her from her people” (SOS 148), thus providing her with only a marginal existence within the black community. Despite her isolated, rootless existence, her life is marked by a genuine “compassion for
troubled people" and "a deep concern for and about human relationships" (SOS 149). This attitude distinctly sets her apart from the middle class world of Ruth and Macon Dead, and is characterised by lovelessness.

The antagonism between the two worlds is further expressed on the level of the name symbolism. Indeed, the second generation Macon Dead turns out to be "living dead," as his interest in life is reduced to mere property acquisition. A similar sterility characterizes his wife Ruth, whose maiden name, Foster, alludes to her role as Milkman's foster mother. Bearing in mind that it was Pilate who instigated a new, though brief sexual relationship between Macon and Ruth and that it was she who prevented Ruth from having an abortion, we come to realize that she in fact not only saved Milkman's life but has also always watched over him as if he were her own. By extension, then, Pilate emerges as Milkman's pilot, guiding him, as it were, out of the death world of his parents towards his true destiny, i.e. the discovery of his African heritage. Significantly Pilate's role as genealogical guide also involves her final restoration to her origins through the aid of Milkman, who will prove to be able to provide the rootless Pilate with original family roots, "You've been carrying your father's bones-all this time. ...you have to bury him. ... Back where he belongs. On Solomon's leap" (SOS 333).

Morrison's fiction relies heavily on images of folk processes of communication. In SOS in particular, fictional replications of these folk
processes dominate the narrative. Milkman’s search for the meaning of his life is carried out through a set of interactions that increase in intensity — among others. But what hurls Milkman into this series of experiences is a story of lost treasure. Seeking material value, Milkman discovers history — his place in the story of his ancestors — and that discovery gives him self-understanding.

Storytelling is the primary folk tradition in Morrison’s fictional world, and SOS contains many stories. Surrounding the central narrative of Milkman’s growth to effective manhood are the stories that fill out the context that defines manhood: the story of his parents’ marriage; the story of his friend Guitar’s family; the story of the Seven Days; and, of course the story of his ancestor Solomon. The novel also contains a variety of storytellers — or perhaps informants, for in the folkloric sense, they are not all storytellers. These informants are different from storytellers in the sense that they will inform the character about a particular character or an incident and that would be the end of their role. The storytellers will always have some kind of advice or guidance to offer in addition to the story they narrate, thereby acting as a safe space for the listener. Lutie’s grandmother is a storyteller for she keeps coming back in Lutie’s memory with her warnings, be it, about black men, butchers, white men or whether or not women should work outside.
Milkman is born into a world brimming with mystery and hidden significance. On the day before his birth Robert Smith, the local insurance agent tried to launch into flight from the roof of Mercy Hospital. Milkman will not come to understand the meaning of this act for over thirty years, but not because he hasn’t heard the story. Robert Smith’s story never means anything to Milkman until Guitar tells him the story of the Seven Days, and it does not become significant to him until he can relate Mr. Smith’s effort to fly to that of his ancestor Solomon – and ultimately to his own. The significance of this story is discussed later in the chapter. Milkman’s ignorance is in part a result of his resistance to the significance of the stories he is told. He lacks a connecting imagination. But it is also in part a result of how he is taught to understand things.

Milkman’s parents, Macon and Ruth, are not effective informants for Milkman. Their narration of their own role in the mystery of his heritage is partial, egocentric, and defensive. Macon, for example, tells twenty-two-year-old Milkman his version of the marriage only after Milkman has struck him down for slapping Ruth. He claims that nothing he is about to tell his son is “by way of apology or excuse. It’s just information” (SOS 70).

Similarly when Milkman confronts his mother at the cemetery, she, also tells her story as an act of self-justification. Her version is pathetic, not vengeful, but equally melodramatic. The effect of hearing Ruth’s story is that it leaves Milkman incredulous. Milkman’s parents cannot provide him
with the key to understanding life and his identity. To each of them, he is 
an extension of self, not really an independent person at all.

It is only for Pilate that storytelling is not self-dramatization, self 
justification, or egocentric action. Pilate is Morrison’s most complex and 
concentrated representative of an African American folk tradition. She 
becomes the living ancestor of the text by playing different roles vis-à-vis 
other characters. She is a conjurer, having supplied Ruth with “some 
greenish gray greasy looking stuff” (SOS 125) to put into Macon’s food to 
revive his sexual interest in her. She is a voodoo priestess who puts an end 
to Macon’s effort to abort the resulting pregnancy by placing, “a small doll 
on Macon’s chair in his office. A male doll with a small painted chicken 
bone between its legs and a round red circle painted on its belly” (SOS 
132). A celibate and a teetotaler, she supplies the community with 
homemade intoxicants. It is interesting to compare The Street’s root 
doctor, who also gives Min a doll and some kind of powder to be put in 
Super’s coffee or drink, with Pilate’s power of conjuring. Pilate also 
embodies the image of the black blueswoman, for her song is not the 
spirituality of an old woman, but the sad, ever relevant blues of the lost 
man, flown away, departed, leaving the beloved behind in suffering and 
pain. Most importantly Pilate is a teller of tales. As the communicative act 
of storytelling is central to the action of this migration narrative, the form, 
content, and context of Pilate’s storytelling is the key element in this 
novel. Morrison’s role as an “Afrocentric storyteller” (Wilentz 63) is
unmistakable, and the orature of her foremothers as well as the oral traditions of the Black Community is evident in both the language and the structure of the novel. Morrison comments on her own process of recreating the richness of Black speech in her writings: "... I have to rewrite, discard, and remove the print quality of the language to put back the oral quality where intonation, volume, gesture are all there" (Tate 126). Her works incorporate the use of African American folktales, folksongs and legends.

Pilate's interactions with Milkman — and with others — are informed by processes of narration that have little to do with the patterns of self protection and self justification seen in Ruth and Macon. When Milkman and Guitar visit her in the winehouse, she immediately assumes towards them the pose that is central to her self-concept — that of teacher, preceptor, exemplar. Macon tells his son, "Pilate can't teach you a thing you can use in this world" (SOS 55), but he is absolutely wrong. Pilate begins by teaching the boys how to talk properly:

Milkman took a breath, held it, and said, "Hi." Pilate laughed. "You all must be the dumbest unhung Negroes on earth. What they telling you in them schools? You say 'Hi' to pigs and sheep when you want 'em to move. When you tell a human being 'Hi,' he ought to get up and knock you down." (SOS 37)
She then proceeds to teach Milkman and Guitar her formula for the perfect soft boiled egg. When she has their attention—"they sat in a pleasant semi-stupor, listening to her go on and on" (SOS 40)—Pilate begins her story. Unlike Macon’s story, it is not a defense of Macon, without whose brotherly love and protection she would have died in the Pennsylvania woods after their father was murdered. Her story is complex, punctuated by questions from Guitar—moving from personal familial history, including the appearance of the ghost of Pilate’s and Macon’s father, to later experiences and back to the ghost, keeping Milkman and Guitar entranced: “The boys watched, afraid to say anything lest they ruin the next part of her story, and afraid to remain silent lest she not go on with its telling” (SOS 43). But the storytelling session is indeed Pilate’s “formulaic closure” in refrain/repetition and a dying fall:

We just stood there looking at the stump (where the ghost of their father had been sitting). “Shaking like leaves.... Shaking like leaves,” she murmured, “just like leaves.” (SOS 43)

Pilate’s performance of her story is not intended to amuse Milkman and Guitar, but to educate them. She gives them “a perfect egg”—the symbol of the beginning of things. More than merely giving the boys an egg, she teaches them how to make eggs. Her lesson is both practical and spiritual; her method of timing the perfect soft boiled egg is to go off and “do one small obligation” either to self or others, “like answering the door or emptying the bucket and bringing it in off the front porch” or even going to
the toilet. Her story continues these lessons, showing Milkman's daunting father as a frightened child, as incapable of doing something they now know how to do—"he couldn't cook worth poot" (SOS 40)—and demonstrating the continuing relationship between the living and the dead. Though it will be nearly twenty years before Milkman comes to understand Pilate and her values, in her storytelling she is teaching him how to be a single, separate African American person—indeed though idiosyncratic—while also connected to a family, a community and a culture. On a sensuous level Milkman, while young, is able to recognize the folk heritage surrounding Pilate and her home:

... it was the first time in his life that he remembered being completely happy. ... He was sitting comfortably in the notorious wine house; he was surrounded by women who seemed to enjoy him and who laughed out loud. And he was in love. No wonder his father was afraid of them. (SOS 47)

Milkman sees a family who, unlike his own, lives their life simply: "They ate what they had or came across or had a craving for" (SOS 29). The three women treat him with generosity, kindness, and love; and as he thinks, "all of them (have) a guileless look about them..." (SOS 46). Bjork points out that,

He [and the] readers have entered into what appears to be a social utopia, an alternative world of blissful clarity where difference articulates a form of liberation
from the predictable and reified world of Macon Dead.

(91)

Even Macon himself, in spite of his objection to Pilate’s difference from other women, feels liberated as one night he walks past the wine house and hears the women singing,

They were singing some melody that Pilate was leading. A phrase that the other two were taking up and building on. Her powerful contralto, Reba’s piercing soprano in counterpoint, and the soft voice of the girl, Hagar, ..., pulled him like a carpet tack under the influence of a magnet. Surrendering to the sound, ... of that music... made him think of fields and wild turkey and calico. (SOS 29)

Macon secretly yearns to come out of his hibernation and to accept fully the family he had denied in his “drive for wealth” (SOS 28). Just listening to the song, “(he) felt himself softening under the weight of memory and music, .... He liked looking at them freely this way” (SOS 30).

Pilate’s world is cyclical, expansive, and alluring to anyone who comes in contact with it. Instead of representing the past, she carries it with her in the form of songs and stories and harmonizes it with the present. Her past softens and liberates others because she evokes and embodies a collective (un)consciousness which manifests itself in what the narrator calls, “a deep concern for and about human relationships” (SOS 150). Pilate’s folk
culture may appear antithetical to the Macon Dead family, but its liberating song pulses through their lives and through the lives of the entire community. Consciously, as Macon says the three are “just like common street women” (SOS 20), but intuitively, he and the community feel the significance of their “collective difference”. In Petry’s TS, also, Lutie unconsciously murmurs the song which, her grandmother used to sing to her, in her troubled moments. It always had a soothing effect on her although Petry, of course, hasn’t exploited enough, this trope the way Morrison does it here in SOS.

Pilate, while dealing with others too, has a teaching attitude. When Ruth hears that Hagar, Pilate’s granddaughter, is trying to kill Milkman for breaking off their affair, she goes to Pilate’s house to confront her. Pilate attempts to teach both Ruth and Hagar a lesson: “Two growed-up women talkin’ bout a man like he was a house or needed one. He ain’t a house, he’s a man, and whatever he need, don’t none of you got it” (SOS 137-38). Hagar’s near madness means that the lesson is almost useless for her. It only increases her confusion and frustration. Pilate offers Ruth a lesson that Ruth recognizes as, in part, ritualized and formulaic:

“ Ain’t nothin natural about death. It’s the most unnatural thing they is.”

“You think people should live forever?”

... “Who’s to decide? Which ones should live and which ones shouldn’t?”
"The people themselves. Some folks want to live forever. Some don't. I believe they decide on it anyway. People die when they want to and if they want to. Don't nobody have to die if they don't want to."

(SOS 140)

Ruth remembers her last visit to the winehouse, to ask for Pilate's help in preventing Macon from forcing her to abort her foetus. "My visit was about my son then, too" (SOS 139). Pilate's lesson for Ruth is that Milkman cannot be killed by Hagar, not because she won't continue to try, but because Milkman doesn't want to die.

As a representation of a woman who has gained social and moral experience in the world which her community finds it difficult to absorb, Pilate's prototype or predecessor is Janie in Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God. Janie's telling of her life story to her friend Pheoby changes Pheoby's life. But Pilate is a larger figure than Janie. She is more than a woman who has found her voice and a satisfactory experience in tragic love. Various aspects of the culture of which she is master suggests that Morrison most certainly does not mean to limit her to a supporting role. On the contrary, more like Janie than any other predecessor, Pilate represents the rich, complex, and often problematic aspects of culture which every individual must struggle against to serve his or her human needs. People fear Pilate as they fear Janie, because her personal power
goes beyond the conventions of gender. Her navel-less belly is the symbol of her alienation, an alienation which is the ultimate cause of her radical individuality:

Men frowned, women whispered and shoved their children behind them... when she realized what her situation in the world was and would probably always be she threw away every assumption she had learned and began at zero. (SOS 148-149)

Pilate functions as a priestess or shaman; she is a figure of power and mystery “kept... just barely within the boundaries of the elaborately socialized world of black people” (SOS 149) by her love for other troubled people.

The blues encompasses the psychological state of someone who is exploited, abused, dominated, and dispossessed. The vast majority of blues lyrics tell of migrant men leaving their women, or women who are trying to escape the “blues”. Other lyrics draw specifically on the natural disasters which haunt the South, causing economic destruction and displacement. Pilate presents Milkman with a blues and a riddle. The song she is constantly singing – sang to Robert Smith as he prepared to fly off the roof of Mercy Hospital, sang with Reba and Hagar as her brother Macon watched through the window of the winehouse, sang to Milkman and Guitar during their secret visit – is her most important storytelling.
The song itself is a verse and chorus with a classic blues feeling:

- O Sugarman don’t leave me here
- Cotton balls to choke me
- O Sugarman don’t leave me here
- Buckra’s arms to yoke me
- Sugarman done fly away
- Sugarman done gone
- Sugarman cut across the sky
- Sugarman gone home. (SOS 49)

Pilate sings this song in emotionally charged circumstances. When she sings it outside Mercy Hospital before Mr. Smith’s attempt at flight, it serves to channelise the anxiety of the waiting crowd, who “listened as though it were the helpful and defining music in a silent movie” (SOS 6). But Pilate seems to be singing it to Mr. Smith, with irony, sadness, and support.

Black music serves as an important safe space in migration narratives. In an interview after the publication of Tar Baby, her fourth novel, Morrison described her writing as “village literature, fiction that is really for the village, for the tribe” (Leclair 26). Until quite recently American black people have lived in an actual or metaphorical village, “underneath the white civilization,” (Leclair 26) and they have communicated among themselves by private codes of gossip, humour, stories, and especially music. Now that they are moving into the city and confronting the new
urban values, they need something more than music to help them define their roles and save what is essential in their past. Morrison wants her fiction to do "what music used to do" for her people. Music is no longer enough because her people are being devoured by cultural symbols that do not treat them seriously or measure up to the original power of their spoken traditions. To keep these people and their traditions alive, she creates a place for them in fiction, a medium which addresses the integrated and progressively literate communities of a modern city.

Fiction does not just replace music, but, also absorbs many of those qualities which have made music so expressive for black people over the years. Realizing this, Morrison accompanies the actions and dialogues of her novels with a sound track of gospel songs, folk tunes, standards, and blues, and many of her characters sing, hum, or whistle their way through scenes of joy and trouble. She also surrounds these musical performances with images representing the values of the village that need to be preserved and rearranged to fit life in the city. Approaching music as a model for her writing she follows its sounds and rhythms in her people into the literary medium and make them feel at home in their new environment. Wegs notes,

... Morrison takes on the role of a blues singer in order both to explore how folk values buried in the past may contribute to a better future for all her people and to describe variations in traditional male and female roles
in order that her readers may analyze for themselves which ones appear most valuable. (211-12)

In his study of African American culture, Lawrence Levin describes the dual (individual and group) nature of the blues as "a perfect instrument for voicing the internal group problems, the individual personal difficulties and experiences" (268). Milkman's return journey to the South will throw more light on this aspect of the migration narrative.

Closely linked with the blues song, is the myth of flying Africans in the novel. Most blues lyrics image the basic difference between the male and the female response to harsh experiences; men run away from trouble while women complainingly endure it. A popular blues lyric, which, according to Levine, "generations of Negroes" repeated with variations, makes the point succinctly:

When a woman takes the blues,
She tucks her head and cries;
But when a man catches the blues
He catches er freight and rides. (White 394)

Most of the principal male and female figures in SOS fit this model of men who flee and women who lament; more specifically, the men fly away and leave their women to sing the blues. In an interview with Toni Morrison, Robert Stepto noted that "most of the major male characters in black literature are in motion" (226). In SOS, Morrison draws on specific African American legends of Africans who could fly and who used this marvellous
ability to escape from slavery in America; that is literally to transcend bondage. During the period of slavery, legends of people who could fly were widespread throughout the South. The common denominator of these folk tales consists in their voicing a longing to go back to one's original home, i.e. Africa. It is this very notion of flying as a return to one's roots which underlines the action in SOS. Significantly, the novel opens with the account of a black insurance agent, who has announced to the black community that "at 3.00 p.m. on Wednesday the 18th of February, 1931, I will take off from Mercy and fly on my own wings" (SOS 3). In the public announcement of his plans which he tacks to his office door two days in advance, he pleads for forgiveness and protests, "I loved you all" (SOS 3). Many pages later the reader realizes that the flier is apologizing for his role as assassin not his suicidal flight. Moreover Milkman is born in the same hospital from whose roof Mr. Smith had taken off. The intimate connection between the two events is emphasized by the following narrative comment:

Mr. Smith's blue silk wings must have left their mark, because when the little boy discovered, at four, the same thing Mr. Smith had learned earlier - that only birds and airplanes could fly - he lost all interest in himself. To have to live without that single gift saddened him and left his imagination so bereft that he appeared to be dull.... (SOS 9)
From the very beginning, then, Milkman's existence is closely linked to the motif of flying. It is said of him, for example, that he feels an "unrestrained joy at anything that could fly" (178), and while in the airplane that takes him to Pennsylvania he experiences a feeling of freedom; "In the air, away from real life, he felt free, but on the ground... the wings of all those other people's nightmares flapped in his face and constrained him" (SOS 220). The increasing use of the imagery of flying during Milkman's journey clearly alludes to his growing insight and anticipates on the level of symbolism his final self-discovery in Part II of the novel. He learns Pilate's lesson about flight: that you cannot fly off and leave a body behind, and that you can fly without ever leaving the ground.

Macon and Pilate vie for a controlling influence over Milkman. Their different relation to the land inversely determines how they function in the novel to help or hinder Milkman. Macon remains dead to the past, which is celebrated and carried unself-consciously by Pilate. Macon, defeated by his father's murder, has leased his identity to fluctuations in the real estate market and in the whims of bank lenders out of desperation to prove his worth. Pilate, on the other hand, a restless wanderer, owns only those objects that implicitly direct her search for place: rocks, a sack of human bones, and a geography book – her only legacy until she nurtures Milkman. Instead of washing her hands free of the past, she fills them with such common objects, burdens really, until Milkman's discovery shows them to be the family treasure they always were.
Though many in the North would try to retain their collective memories through the process of naming the land, others would change their view of the land. In attempting to fulfill the promise that the North represents to them, these few would see the North as an object for their use, for profit, rather than a living entity, an embodiment of their past. In their pursuit of money, they endanger the community by renting its fabric, by creating a hierarchy based on those who own things. The story of Milkman Dead is radically affected by the change in values from his southern grandfather's defence of his land with his life, to his northern father, who almost destroys his entire family in the pursuit of more and more property. And Milkman's search for gold, the profit from the land of his origins, which ironically he wants in order to free himself from his family; underscores the difference between the old traditions and the new. But Land reaffirms itself, for in his search for gold, Milkman discovers a greater treasure - his real name and his roots in the land, which enable him to fly beyond it to a greater truth.

As Milkman begins his search for identity he is most strongly influenced by the hatred and greed present in his father's house. Self-centred and uncommitted, Milkman feels no responsibility to home or family. Indeed, he is insensitive to the needs of his mother and sisters, careless and cruel in his affair with Hagar, and unknowing about the effects of his actions. In terms of the novel's imagery, he flies solo, shaking off domestic responsibility and scorning the possibility of love. The incident when he
wets his sister's dress represents his complete lack of concern for his family: "He didn't mean it. ... It was becoming a habit – this concentration on things behind him. Almost as though there were no future to be had" (SOS 35). Milkman also perverts his relationship with his cousin Hagar. Tired of her, he only wants a way out, for the attraction he had once felt had changed. As Milkman rejects all family relationships, the forces working against the family: hatred, indifference, self-involvement, and love of property come into stark relief. The burdensome destructive influence of greed on both the family and individual becomes clearer, especially when Milkman and Guitar attempt to steal the gold in Pilate's house. For wealth and treasure, he hurts Pilate, "... who had cooked him his first perfect egg. who had shown him the sky ..." (SOS 209). Milkman begins to see how his real crime was not breaking and entering Pilate's house but his rejection of family. Milkman's relationship with Guitar further delineates this conflict between domestic values and hatred. Milkman's selfish behaviour is a result of too much of comfort provided by his family to him.

Guitar and Milkman represent two alternatives to the distortion of values. While Milkman tentatively identifies with his father's middle class ideology, Guitar embodies the displaced rural Southerner whose alienation, unlike Milkman's, is "esconced" in racial hatred. His position is a reaction to the primal trauma of his life when, as a boy, his father is cut in half in a sawmill accident and as recompense, his mother willingly accepts forty dollars from the white owner. His perceptions of his mother's
moral cowardice and betrayal convince Guitar that his commitment to and love of black people must find its expression in hateful aggression. Guitar becomes obsessed with his disaffection to the extent that he actively participates in a secret society known as the “Seven Days.” However, Guitar Bains, removed from the well heeled world of Not Doctor Street, acts as Milkman’s guide to the wilderness of Southside, where the African American underclass lives. The novel’s opening underscores the importance Guitar will have as Milkman’s guide and mentor. When Milkman’s mother, Ruth, goes into labour, Guitar is sent around to the emergency room to fetch help. Later, at the age of seventeen, Guitar befriends the twelve year old Milkman and from that time on Guitar is always there for his young friend. That the older boy befriends a younger one is unusual, but the friendship is odder still when we recall that approximately seven years earlier Macon turned Guitar’s family out on the street for not paying rent. While he espouses his single-minded doctrine of avenging the victimisation of his black brothers, he appears as Milkman’s alter-ego whose social perceptions seem more correctly fixed than Milkman’s. This is coupled with his communal Southern background and his “slow smile of recognition” (SOS 49) towards Pilate’s folk world, where Guitar provides an antithetically connective energy in Milkman’s search for self and place. Kiswana, too, in TWOBP plays a similar kind of role while helping Cora Lee with her children whom Cora cannot manage. It is because of Kiswana that Cora is inspired to imagine and dream, after their visit to the play, about the betterment of her children.
Guitar recognizes Milkman's disconnection, his lack of a cultural heritage when he tells him that Milkman would not live in a place like Montgomery, Alabama for he is "A man that can't live there" (SOS 104). Guitar also makes Milkman recognize that he accepts only limited responsibility for his life and for the lives around him. He is "not a serious person" (SOS 104) and that he is merely an egg whose shell needs to be broken. From the beginning Milkman’s story has been infused with irony, paradox, and contradiction. Part II of the novel continues this cycle.

Milkman embarks on a Southern journey in search of gold. His trip is a "journey of immersion" par excellence. According to Stepto, the journey of immersion is,

A ritualized journey into a symbolic South, in which the protagonist seeks those aspects of tribal literacy that ameliorate, if not obliterate, the conditions imposed by solitude. The conventional immersion narrative ends almost paradoxically with the questing figure located in or near the narrative's most oppressive social structure, but free in the sense that he has gained sufficient tribal literacy to assume the mantle of an articulate kinsman. (167)

Milkman emerges as a true "articulate kinsman," who though he does not feel "close" to the people he meets on his journey, feels connected to them and finally, after linking his history with theirs, is able to attain the status
of storyteller. The journey is divided into three segments and culminates in his having learned his acquiring the ability to memorize, sing, and adopt the family song to meet present needs. During the course of the journey, he finally traces the history of the ancestor— not just his immediate grandfather, but the African who is the subject of the Song of Solomon. When he learns the meaning of the song, he realizes his own lack of responsibility.

Early in the novel, Morrison situates Danville, Pennsylvania, as the site of one ancestor, Macon Dead I, by telling of his brutal death at the hands of white people. Milkman is familiar with this story as he arrives in Danville on the first leg of his journey. Through the safe space of song and storytelling, he becomes acquainted with the ancestor. A series of elders grant him a better understanding of the circumstances surrounding the death of his most immediate ancestor, Macon Dead I, and an introduction to those ancestors who preceded Macon Dead I. The first elders are Pilate and Macon Dead II, both of whom first narrate to him the story of their father. In Danville, he is introduced to several more elders, the male contemporaries of his father, most notably Reverend Cooper and Circe, the midwife who helped in Pilate's birth and hid her and Macon following the lynching of their father. By example, Reverend Cooper teaches Milkman the art of framing and telling a story. “Milkman felt a glow listening to a story come from this man that he'd heard of many times before but only
half listened to" (SOS 233). History comes to life for him. He can identify the sites of the story – it no longer has a distanced exoticism.

During his stay in Danville, he meets other elders, boyhood companions of his father, who bring to life his family’s history, make a living, breathing, folk hero of his grandfather and listen attentively to his own rendering of a tale. He is empowered by them to construct his own narrative, the sequel to theirs – The Dead Clan in the city. The story is told not only to entertain but also to uplift the spirits of the listeners, to help them share in the success of the characters, and to give them a sense of pride. During the period of listening to and telling his story, Milkman is forced to re-conceptualize his notion of time. The urgency with which he wants to move on in his journey, in his search for the lost gold, is restricted when he must wait days before someone is able to give him a ride to the home where Pilate and Macon were hidden.

Although the slowness with which Reverend Cooper responds to his request to be driven to the house appears to Milkman as evidence of country incompetence, it in fact, prepares him for the meeting with Circe, the most important elder of the second section of this novel. He must experience a different notion of temporality before meeting Circe: Circe who helped to bring Pilate into the world and was one hundred years old, Circe who, like the Biblical figures of the old Testament, lives close to two centuries. In his meeting with Circe he is snatched away literally from
reality: “She grabbed him, grabbed his shoulders and pulled him right up against her and tightened her arms around him” (SOS 239). From Circe he learns more of his family history: he learns the real name of Macon Dead I, Jake and of his Indian grandmother, Sing. He learns that while his father left Danville and headed North for the city, Pilate travelled further South. He learns that Macon Dead I never received a proper burial. But most important, he learns of the necessity of being patient with time, which will redeem all injustice. Angry with Circe, for staying on in the Butler’s home, he accuses her: “You loved those white folks that much?” (SOS 246). Circe explains to him that she stayed because in course of time she emerged triumphant: “Everything in this world they (the whites) lived for will crumble and rot…. And I want to see it all go, make sure it does go, and that nobody fixes it up” (SOS 247). Circe’s method of vengeance is strikingly different from that of Guitar and “the Seven Days”, who seek to even the score between blacks and whites every moment. Circe’s method is grounded in an understanding of history. It is an understanding best explained by Reverend Cooper when he tells Milkman,

   Things work out, son. The ways of God are mysterious,
   but if you live it out, just live it out, you see that it
   always works out. Nothing they stole or killed for did
   ’em a bit a good: Not one bit. (SOS 232)

This is also a warning to Milkman that ultimately his quest for gold is a futile one.
In Danville, Milkman begins for the first time in his life to listen. Still he is not cognizant of the true mission of his journey. He is still in search of the gold, although the driving force behind the second leg of his journey is the need to trace the history of his family. He has heard part of the story; he must hear the rest and he must experience a part of it before he realizes his own destiny as a kinsman. In exchange for the tools provided to him by the elders, Milkman must give up the luxury of trains and planes and begin to lose some of his material trappings. In giving up the man-made flight of planes, he embarks on a “surrealistic” journey into history.

The second leg of Milkman’s journey takes him to Shalimar, Virginia, home of the original ancestor. Here he begins a rite of passage that will allow him to find the true gold (goal) of his journey – his history. In Shalimar, he undergoes a process of initiation. He starts with insulting local men first by asking about their women and then by making a pretentious but sincere statement about buying a new car if his old one cannot be fixed:

They looked with hatred at the city Negro who could buy a car as if it were a bottle of whiskey because the one he had was broken. ...He hadn’t bothered to say his name, nor ask theirs, had called them “them,” and would certainly despise their days, which should have been spent harvesting their own crops, instead of waiting around the general store hoping a truck would
come looking for mill hands or tobacco pickers in the flatlands that belonged to somebody else. (SOS 266)

To them, his clothes and his manner, represent those set of mannerism which they associate with the urban white men and which reminded them that they had no crops and land of their own.

He was telling them that they weren't men, that they relied on women and children for their food. ...They had seen him watching their women and rubbing his fly as he stood on the steps. ...They looked at his skin and saw it was as black as theirs, but they knew he had the heart of the white men who came to pick them up in the trucks when they needed anonymous, faceless laborers. (SOS 266)

Here, in this novel about black manhood, there emerges yet another set of criteria – a set based on certain class assumptions of which these men of Shalimar fall short. They opt to test Milkman's manhood from their own criteria, criteria which include oral virtuosity, fighting, and finally a familiarity with and relationship to nature.

The younger men engage him in the rhetorical game of signification that challenges his sexuality. The signifying session ends in a duel where Milkman faces his knife-bearing opponent with a broken bottle. After his peer group initiates his rite of passage,
the older men... take over. ...No name-calling toilet contest for them. No knives either, or hot breath and knotted neck muscles. They would test him, ... and beat him, probably on some other ground. (SOS 269)

The ground is quite literal. These Shalimar elders take Milkman on a midnight hunting trip where he confronts his own incompetence and where he is forced onto a process of self-evaluation:

... what he was doing sitting in the middle of a woods in Blue Ridge County. He had come here to find traces of Pilate’s journey, ... to find anything he could that would either lead him to gold or convince him that it no longer existed. How had he got himself involved in a hunt, .... What kind of savages were these people? Suspicious. Hot tempered. Eager to find fault and despise any outsider. ... Devious, jealous, traitorous, and evil. He had done nothing to deserve their contempt. Nothing to deserve the explosive hostility that engulfed him when he said he might have to buy a car.

...It sounded old. Deserve. Old and tired and beaten to death. Deserve. Now it seemed to him that he was always saying or thinking that he didn’t deserve some bad luck, or some bad treatment from others.... He’d
told Guitar that he didn't "deserve" his family's
dependence, hatred or... the misery and mutual
accusations his parents unloaded on him.

Apparently he thought he deserved only to be loved –
from a distance.... And in return he would be... what?
Pleasant? Generous? May be all he was really saying
was: I am not responsible for your pain; share your
happiness with me but not your unhappiness.

(SOS 275-77)

The first half of this quotation draws a picture of Milkman as we have
come to know him. He is greedy – in search of gold; self-centred – he sees
negative responses to him as the consequence of the character of others
and not a response to his own flawed character. Still the fact that some of
the sentences are questions suggests Milkman’s first self-reflective
moment. Questions are open-ended; there is always room for exploration
on the other side of them. “Deserve” is the word that the first and second
paragraphs share. Deserve is stated at first as something taken for
granted, then questioned and finally compared to the word “earn”. When
Milkman examines his relationships to the word “deserve” he comes to a
moment of recognition and engages in a self-critique necessary for
personal growth. Milkman sees himself, for the first time, as Guitar,
Magdalene, and the reader have come to know him. This recognition
marks a turning point in Milkman’s life.
He emerges from the forest as a member tribe, having been initiated by this rite of passage – the midnight hunting trip – where he had to confront all his fears about himself. The men who at first were insulted at his expressed desire for the women of the group, now point him in the direction of one of them, Sweet.

Milkman has now been prepared to receive the full family history. From this moment on, he is in a constant state of self-reflection, and following each moment of self discovery he is rewarded with information. After realizing that he had used Hagar, betrayed Pilate, and taken his family for granted, he again listens to the game song of the Shalimar children. However, this time he is able to crack the code embedded in the lyrics:

Jake the only son of Solomon
Come booba yalle, come booba tambee
Whirled about and touched the sun
Come konka yalle, come konka tambee

Left that baby in a white man’s house
Come booba yalle, come booba tambee
Heddy took him to a red man’s house
Come konka yalle, come konka tambee
Black lady fell down on the ground
Come booba yalle, come booba tambee
Threw her body all around
Come konka yalle, come konka tambee
Solomon and Ryna Belali Shalut
Yaruba Medina Muhammet too.
Nestor Kalina Saraka cake.
Twenty-one children, the last one Jake!

O Solomon don’t leave me here
Cotton balls to choke me
O Solomon don’t leave me here
Buckra’s arms to yoke me

Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone
Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home.

(SOS 303)

This is the “Song of Solomon” – song of the son. The song not only tells Milkman his family history, but it also embodies the history of the African in the New World. The mythologies informing the song are the Greek tale of Icarus and Daedelus and the African American folk tale of the Flying African. Griffin notes,

Embodied within the lyrics are a documentation of the diversity of African ethnicities and religions that converge on the American continent, the horror of fragmentation and destruction of black families and
black bodies, and their economic exploitation – all in a plea to the ancestor, Solomon, who flew off and left these bodies on these hostile shores. Caroling softly souls of slavery. (176)

Milkman is the son, returned to take the wisdom, beauty, and pathos of this song into the future. He is nourished by this journey of immersion and prepared to provide this spiritual sustenance to Pilate by informing her of the family history. However, the true sustenance he provides to Pilate is in singing the song, transformed now, into her dying ear: "Sugargirl don't leave me here/ Cotton balls to choke me/ Sugargirl don't leave me here/ Buckra's arms to yoke me" (SOS 336).

For Milkman, a return to the Southern home of his ancestors is absolutely necessary for the acquisition of a historical consciousness, for his standing on a higher spiritual and intellectual plane. The South to which he goes is not a place of racial horror and shame, it is a site of history and redemption for him – a place where he can begin to piece together the fragments of his history and where he can grasp and sing the Song of the Son. In singing the Song of the Son, Milkman becomes the literate tribesman and the nurturer of Pilate. In writing SOS, Morrison seeks to accomplish the same task. This text is the novel as ancestor. In "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," Morrison asserts:

The novel is needed by African-Americans now in ways that it was not needed before—and it is following along
the lines of the function of novels everywhere. We don't live in places where we can hear those stories anymore; parents don't sit around and tell their children those classical, mythological archetypal stories that we heard years ago. But new information has got to get out, and there are several ways to do it. One is the novel. (Evans 340)

By retelling the folk story of the Flying African, by embodying the history of the Dead Clan and a history of Africans in the New World, Morrison's novel is itself a site of the ancestor. However, as Michael Awkward has shown us, the function of the novel as ancestor is two fold:

1. to preserve the tradition of Afro-American folktales, folk wisdom, and general cultural beliefs, and

2. to adapt to contemporary times and needs such traditional beliefs by infusing them with "new information," and to transmit the resultant amalgam of traditional and "new" to succeeding generations. (483)

One of the things that Morrison clearly wants to revise, to infuse with new information, and to transmit to new generations is the notion of black manhood which she inherits from writers like Wright, Ellison and Baraka. It is quite significant that her revision of the idea of manhood goes hand in hand with her revision of the tropes of the migration narrative. Both insist on an understanding of the necessity of confronting, knowing, and
transcending the past, and they insist on a notion of manhood that is balanced in its feminine and masculine qualities. However, although Morrison offers revised notions of manhood, it is quite intriguing to note that it remains a manhood that is achieved by sacrificing women. Just as Bigger had to kill Bessie in *Native Son*, so too must Hagar die before Milkman is able to learn and grow from her death. In Morrison’s world, even Pilate must suffer so that she can be the recipient of Milkman’s nurturance. Then Milkman too becomes a guide or pilot, for he leaps from Solomon’s Leap toward Guitar “as fleet and bright as a lodestar” (SOS 337). To celebrate life-giving love over death, even the hills and rocks participate in echoing the novel’s message as Milkman’s shouts to Guitar reverberate this life-affirming statement about being black: “Tar tar tar... Am am am am... Life life life life” (SOS 337). The novel chronicles the blues history of an individual, a family, and a people who are not really *Dead* but alive.

To be truly alive, one must love and act upon that love. Having finally learned to love, Milkman leaps toward Guitar to carry out his recent insight that “Perhaps that’s what all human relationships boiled down to: Would you save my life? Or would you take it?” (SOS 331). Thus, he sails towards Guitar not necessarily to take his life but perhaps to save through active love the life of the man he still regards as “his brother” (SOS 337). To Morrison, loss of familial, communal, and brotherly love may be reasons to sing the blues, but its presence can offer the power to soar.
Thus, the tropes of counter migration have been modified considerably over the decades till it comes to Morrison. Morrison redefines black manhood, while modifying the tropes. Milkman’s journey to the south is the search for self and his familial roots. He emerges as a true “articulate kinsman” who is able to attain the status of a storyteller. He becomes the storyteller for Pilate – the ancestor of the text – and sings the song into her dying ears, informing her of the family history. The elders too in the second section who also serve as ancestors educate and enlighten him about his family through storytelling. Milkman learns the necessity of being patient with time from Circe and Reverend Cooper. It is because of this art of storytelling that he begins to piece together the fragments of his history. The art of storytelling is an important trope, which enriches Milkman. It is because of storytelling that the novel itself becomes a site of ancestor.

Thus, in Morrison’s work the South becomes not only a site of racial redemption and identity but also the place where Africa is most present. The South is more susceptible to the forms of social protest that take place there during the Civil Rights Movement. Therefore, it is more likely to be affected by social change. Because of this it can be, reconsidered as a place of cultural origins, home of the ancestors, as a place to be redeemed. The North, however a more complex and omniscient power, is not susceptible to the same strategies of the Civil Rights Movement.
Artists who recognize this begin to represent the South in ways alluded to by their predecessors and to re-imagine the possibilities the South holds for African American people. Morrison is not the first to have the South re-emerge as a site of African American history and culture. Ralph Ellison, Albert Murray, and Alice Walker precede her. However, Morrison is the first novelist whose texts not only tell the story of the ancestor in the South, but also embody the ancestor. This shows a tremendous change and revision in the handling of the tropes of migration from Petry to Naylor and then to Morrison. In fact, Morrison and Naylor both writing after the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s – complete the literary movement from the individual to the collective community and from the power struggle between black and white men to the black family as a “site of violence”. Both women are historically and physically removed from the reality of lynching and castration. Morrison, inherits and revises Baldwin’s language, his moral vision, and his concern with the consequences of violence on history and community. Gloria Naylor, however, begins to explore in greater detail Baldwin’s depiction of Southern black families as patriarchal institutions. Unlike Morrison, Gloria Naylor has defined herself as a feminist and seeks to give voice to the silenced black women of earlier texts. Petry, on the other hand, experiments with the possibilities of safe spaces in her novel which represents the urban female experience. There is a refusal to romanticize the South while she is asserting the negative impact of the city. Petry is also different from Naylor and Morrison in stressing on the individual and not the community. While The Street ends
with Lutie's confinement by a psychic brick wall, Naylor's *The Women Of Brewster Place* ends with a vision of the destruction of the wall by those it seeks to confine. While Lutie moves further and further away from "the ancestor", the women of Brewster place return time and again to the maternal safe space whether it exists as the neighbourhood itself, as ritual, or in friendships between women. Morrison handles the issue in a different way as the novel itself is a site of the ancestor. There is a return journey to the South. Here at this point it is necessary to take into account other writers too who showed a journey back to the South as a viable option in their works. The decades of the Seventies and Eighties found African American writers and literary critics participating in a reconsideration of the South and of black folk culture. The early fiction of Paul Lawrence Dunbar and Jean Toomer's *Cane* first established a return to the South as a possibility for black migrants. However, for the most part, the South remained the site of racial horror and shame for black writers. Nella Larsen, in *Quicksand*, provides us with a protagonist whose return to the South signals her metaphoric death. In the 1960s Amiri Baraka's *The System of Dante's Hell* contributes a questing protagonist who must return to the South for a necessary understanding of African American culture but not a destiny. It is not till the seventies and eighties that writers like Morrison, Walker, Maya Angelou, and Toni Cade Bambara begin to reconsider the South seriously as a viable option for black people. Alice Walker's *The Third Life Of Grange Copeland* and Toni Morrison's *Song Of Solomon* are novels whose central figures were black males who
upon returning to the South, discover the nurturing side of themselves. Hence, the tropes of migration, for instance: the use of the "safe spaces" by the three writers under study has been quite different from each other, and undergo a change by the time Morrison handles these tropes. She completes the circle by the process of Counter-migration.
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