As fleet and bright as a lodestar he wheeled toward Guitar and it did not matter which one of them would give up his life in the killing arms of his brother. For now he knew what Shalimar knew: if you surrendered to the air you could ride it.
Chapter 3

The Colour of Love:
Measures of Self Worth in *Song of Solomon*

Though *Song of Solomon* is Morrison's only book with a male as the central character, it is, nevertheless, supported by a brilliant cast of female protagonists as well. These women include Milkman's paternal aunt - Pilate, cousin - Hagar, mother - Ruth, and sisters - Magdalene called Lena and First Corinthians. Harry Reed comments that Milkman's quest is “buttressed by his female relationships. The fluid constellations of black women loving him, supporting him, guiding him and even rejecting him confirm the nurturing aspects of black life.”¹ All these characters contribute significantly, but in varying measures, to Milkman's development from a headstrong, chauvinistic, arrogant, materialistic young man to a mature person who finally comes to appreciate the richness of his African background as well as the worth of his ancestors, and makes both an integral part of his identity and selfhood. Each woman demonstrates characteristics and personality traits very different from those of the others. This chapter seeks to study these female characters to show how their race-consciousness develops as a result of their experiences - both

¹ Harry Reed, “Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* and Black Cultural Nationalism,”
within and outside the community - and manifests itself in their varying attitudes toward life. Even as these women lead Milkman toward an understanding of his true self, the search for their own identity and purpose in life, the craving to understand who they are, and what they desire becomes, eventually, the deciding factor between life and death, self affirmation and self negation, ecstatic joy or desperate misery. It decides, ultimately, who finds meaning in life and whose years on the earth are a waste - and why.

Ruth Foster Dead is the first of the Dead women to be introduced in the story. She is the wife of a ruthless real estate agent - Macon Dead (he is literally "Ruth-less" because he does not even acknowledge her presence), and the daughter of the first Negro doctor in town - the late Dr. Foster - a rather conceited man who takes pride in his wealthy, light-skinned family, and feels superior to other black people. Morrison depicts Ruth as a motherless girl whose pathetic existence can be traced back to a rich but lonely childhood and her subsequent, unfortunate marriage to the ferocious, money-minded Macon Dead who keeps "each member of his family awkward with fear" (Song of Solomon 10). He inculcates terror in Ruth by shouting at her, abusing her,
and even hitting her at times. He also tries to force her to abort Milkman while he is still in the womb by making her drink castor oil, thrusting knitting needles inside her, punching her stomach and forcing her to sit on a heated cauldron. Only timely interference by Pilate saves her and the baby. Even though Ruth lives a life of comparative luxury and affluence, initially because of her father's position, and later because of her husband's, she derives no happiness from it. She considers herself too superior to other black women, and is ignored by the white women who know her father. During her father's lifetime, her days are marked only by an unusual devotion to him which continues in strange ways even after his death. On the day that Dr. Foster dies, Macon discovers Ruth lying naked next to her father's dead body, with his fingers in her mouth (she vehemently denies this fact when Milkman confronts her, but Macon is convinced that he is right). Extremely repulsed by the sight, he decides on the spot to have nothing to do with her henceforth. Morrison paints a rather miserable picture of Ruth, and attributes most of her problems to the lack of meaningful love in her life. She is, in Pilate's words, "dying of lovelessness" (151). Her father's death and Macon's abhorrence of her lead her to an uncanny relationship with her

parentheses throughout this chapter.
son whom she continues to breast-feed till he is well past infancy. Even though she senses Milkman's "restraint, his courtesy, his indifference" (13), it only pushes "her into fantasy. She had the distinct impression that his lips were pulling from her a thread of light. It was as though she were a cauldron spinning gold....And that was the other part of her pleasure, a pleasure she hated to give up" (13-14). Ruth feeds Milkman not because she derives sexual pleasure from it, but because it makes her feel important and useful - as if she is lending him sustenance and life. Ironically, however, the milk with which she hopes to nourish him, succeeds only in choking all the love out of him so that, like the late Doctor, he too begins to find her attentions unwanted and unnecessarily stifling.

In Ruth Foster Dead, Morrison creates a black woman whose life is meaningless because she makes no attempt to justify her existence. She is immensely passive, and terribly apathetic toward her own self. She enjoys all the privileges of being connected to a rich and influential family, but does not utilise them either for personal growth or for the betterment of the community. She entertains or goes out only to show off her well-clothed family and expensive possessions - like the large Packard - which the townspeople, now envious, now amused, call "Macon
Dead's hearse" (33). She has inherited this trait in part from her father. Karla Holloway blames Dr. Foster for rearing Ruth "away from her heritage - establishing her as the 'doctor's daughter' and therefore less black than the townsfolk he services. He values her lighter skin precisely because of his desire for this demarcation between his daughter and other black people. As adults, Ruth and Macon Jr. perpetuate this distancing."4 Since Ruth has been brought up without a native, ethnic cultural identity, she lives under the misapprehension that she is superior to other black folks and must not associate with them. She and her husband never cross the societal boundaries that separate them from the rest of the community because doing so would mean a degrading descent down the social ladder. Ruth knows very well that Macon is cruel and unsympathetic when it comes to collecting money from the poor blacks who rent his houses, but she never comes to their rescue. She is never assertive enough to stand up to her husband and demand that he treat other members of the community with compassion and respect. She has no desire to mingle with them, to understand the intricacies of their life, and to become part of the community to which she rightfully belongs.

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Her disinterestedness in the black community is all the more strange because she has both the means and the potential to alleviate some of its miseries - but lacks the initiative. Though Macon Dead holds an iron hand over her, she does have the guts to assert herself and stand up to him when she wants to - and does so only once, when she compels him to part with a substantial amount of cash for Hagar's funeral. In the entire book, this is her only redeeming act, but it comes too late. She has already become a stranger to her own family, and a permanent alien in the black community to which she rightfully belongs. Her emulation of hollow white values, and conceited efforts to maintain a superior, elitist lifestyle, also tells on both her daughters, and adversely affects their initial growth and development too.

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

Only Corinthians makes an attempt to pull her life together by going to a prestigious white women's college. She even spends her junior year abroad in France, but it does not fetch for her the advantages she had assumed it would - working, rather unfortunately, to her disadvantage instead.

Bryn Mawr had done what a four-year dose of liberal education was designed to do: unfit her for eighty percent of the useful work of the world. First, by training her for leisure time, enrichments, and domestic mindlessness. Second, by a clear implication that she was too good for such work. After graduation she
returned to a work world in which colored girls,
regardless of their background, were in demand
for one and only one kind of work. (189)

As in The Bluest Ey e and Tar Baby, Morrison is again critical of the
white education system which, she claims, teaches nothing of
practical importance, and imparts no life skills necessary for
surviving in this world. She implies that such education trains one
only in the elitist pursuits of life, and is based on the assumption
that the people who have been educated there are far above others
of their class. Writing further that Corinthians's "education had
taught her how to be an enlightened mother and wife, able to
contribute to the civilization - or in her case, the civilizing - of her
community..." (188), Morrison satirises, once again, the white
dominated education system which assumes that coloured people
need to be trained or civilised - i.e., they too should learn to adopt
the values of the majority culture, and neglect or forget their own.
Ruth appreciates her daughter's education only because she thinks
that it will enable her to become "a prize for a professional man of
color" (188). Her hopes are, however, dashed, because Corinthians
"lacked drive. These men wanted wives who could manage, who
were not so well accustomed to middle-class life that they had no
ambition, no hunger, no hustle in them" (188). The coloured men of
the day desire wives who are not complacent, who would appreciate
the struggle for social status and hold on to it, once they had acquired it, as a priceless possession. Corinthians is a misfit in their midst because she is “a little too elegant” (188) for them, and her training is such that it gives them an inferiority complex. The irony of her life is that her wealth and education do not allow her to become part of either the black or the white community - leaving her suspended between the two classes instead. Stephanie Demetrakopoulo suggests that Corinthians is “a perfect example of the educated Ivy League daughter who is to use her class and learning only as a persona, as a decoration for her family.” This comment reveals an unfortunate truth: Macon and Ruth are so obsessed with their elitist image, that they never really give their well-educated daughter a chance to utilise her training. They keep her merely as just another ornament to adorn their house and assert their superiority over other members of the community.

Corinthians, however, does not give up easily. Her continued quest for independence, and her determination to find a job ultimately leads her to become a maid to Miss Grahams - the State Poet Laureate. She, however, tells her family that she is an “amauensis,” and also does her best to hide this fact from other girls in the community who are doing the same work. Being a maid

4 Stephanie Demetrakopoulos, “Song of Solomon: The Interdependence of Men’s and Women’s Individuation,” Holloway and Demetrakopoulos 96.
is, nevertheless, good for her self-esteem because in Miss Graham's house she "had what she never had in her own: responsibility. She flourished in a way, and exchanged arrogance occasionally for confidence" (190). Holloway writes that even though her occupation as a maid is a step backwards from the kind of life-style propagated by her parents, it acts as a positive force for her because it gives her "entry into a self-designed reality, and [makes] the potential of her coming to touch herself as a woman a possibility." Corinthians achieves a certain independence by choosing a difficult and humbling occupation over the pompousness of her earlier life-style. Just as Pauline Breedlove in The Bluest Eye takes pleasure from working for the white Fisher family, so Corinthians too derives satisfaction from her job. Morrison implies that it is rather unfortunate that some black women have to turn outside their family and community to find a measure of self-worth. She blames the black community - especially the men - for not providing enough support to a woman to flourish as an individual in their midst. Holloway rightly contends that "a college-educated woman having to assume the position of a maid...illustrates the psychological and social abuse suffered and endured by black women who work in

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5 Holloway 110
these roles, subjugating their pride for some personal goal." This comment demonstrates that black women in white society are not recognised for their true capabilities. They have to constantly diminish and negate their achievements because the dominant culture, and its influence on their own families, does not let them rise above social and cultural stereotypes. Miss Grahams appreciates Corinthians because she can boast to her friends about giving her maid a copy of Walden for Christmas - instead of the usual envelope of money. Her attitude depicts the pretensions of the white community, and demonstrates how its members use less privileged people to brag about their status or show their magnanimity. This shift in Corinthians's profession is also significant because it makes romance with Henry Porter possible, and ultimately allows her to view herself as part of the community to which he belongs.

Just as Corinthians hides behind the mask of superiority, and refuses to acknowledge the reality of her work, however, she is ashamed of accepting Porter's reality as well - even though she is in love with him, and feels secure in his company. It is hard for her to accept the fact that she is dating a mere yardman. Porter, however, confronts her openly one day, and makes her admit that she is

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6 Holloway 110
ashamed of him. He tells her that he does not want a “doll baby,” but rather a “grown-up woman that’s not scared of her daddy” (196). Porter feels that Corinthians needs to grow up - to act mature, and take pride in who she is. If she comes out of her father’s shadow, she would essentially be rejecting the false, snobbish values for which he stands. Corinthians considers his words, and ultimately wins the battle to be a grown up woman rather than a baby-doll when she hurls her pride and snobbishness aside and raps on Porter's car door, begging him to take her back.

She was First Corinthians Dead, daughter of a wealthy property owner and the elegant Ruth Foster, granddaughter of the magnificent and worshipped Dr. Foster...and a woman who had turned heads on every deck of the Queen Mary and had Frenchmen salivating all over Paris. Corinthians Dead...was now banging on the car-door window of a yardman. (197-198)

This act of begging before one of her social inferiors is a humbling experience for Corinthians, yet it signifies a victory for her because it indicates that she has finally let go of the falsehood of her existence, and acknowledged her origins. She has taken the first step toward becoming a mature woman. and when she wakes up on Porter's bed in the morning, she feels like a new person: “she felt
easy. In place of vanity she now felt a self-esteem that was quite new" (201). Corinthians feels light-hearted and happy because she has shed the enormous burden of hypocrisy, and freed herself of the shackles of social superiority her parents had wrapped around her. Her vanity is replaced by a feeling of self-worth because Porter appreciates her for who she is - not where she comes from. Most importantly, however, Corinthians has finally begun to carve an identity for herself, and identify her own priorities. This is the beginning of the formation of her consciousness as an individual. She has come to accept herself as she is, and to take pride in her friends - regardless of their social status or material well-being. She has, in a way become connected to her African roots, and the rich background of her people by being with someone from the very midst of the black community. She has finally made an attempt to abandon the false, uppity, white values that her parents had always inculcated in her to make her feel superior to other black people.

Lena's life is, unfortunately, redundant and quite different from that of Corinthians's. She remains resigned to her fate, and monotonously carries on the job of making red velvet roses for the local department store. Her single redeeming act, like that of her mother's, is when she rebels, just once, against her brother, Milkman. She finds out that Milkman has complained to Macon
about Corinthians's relationship with Porter - with the result that her father has forbidden Corinthians to go out, made her give up her job, and had Porter evicted from his house. Lena calls Milkman to her room and gives him the proverbial piece of her mind.

"Our girlhood was spent like a found nickel on you. When you slept, we were quiet; when you were hungry, we cooked; when you wanted to play, we entertained you...You have yet to...move a fleck of your dirt from one place to another. And to this day, you have never asked one of us if we were tired, or sad, or wanted a cup of coffee." (215)

Lena's words reveal the pent-up bitterness she has been harbouring against the Dead men all these years. She tells Milkman that their adolescence was sacrificed at the altar of his childhood, and points out that they worked like slaves to please him and never received a word of commendation. Her speech indicates the disturbing extent to which the Deads have adopted the white value system. They believe that only a male can control the family and propagate its name. Black values that emphasise the importance and contributions of women as important mother figures are totally neglected. Lena hints at this when she accuses Milkman of trying to run their lives just because he is male. She asks him, "where do
you get the right to decide our lives?...I'll tell you where. From that hog's gut that hangs down between your legs" (215). These insulting remarks indicate Lena's wrath at the fact that a mere biological reality gives men the right to dominate each female member of the family. They require no mental skills, no understanding of human nature, no grasp of every day problems to be heads of the household. The fact that they are male is enough. She then gives another example to show how their father has always exploited them and taken advantage of them. "When we were little girls,...he took us to the ice-house once....There were other children there. Barefoot, naked to the waist, dirty. But we stood apart...in white stockings, ribbons, and gloves....He took us there so they could see us, envy us, envy him" (216). Lena wants to make Milkman realise that Macon never appreciated his family for what it was - but rather for what it looked like, and how many people they could impress by their opulence. These words also suggest that the girls felt helpless, and were forced into snobbish behaviour. Their personalities were curbed because their father never allowed them to behave the way they wanted to. Lena's and Corinthians's desire to mingle with the other children indicates a subconscious wish to be part of their ethnic culture, and participate in the joys and sorrows of their people. Where Corinthians rebels,
however, Lena chooses to ignore her father's tyranny and, except for this one outburst, remains passive throughout the novel. Demetrakopoulos views the life of Lena and Corinthians as "a true, bitter, virulent portrait of what happens to sisters who are made subservient body-servants to a selfish, adored brother simply because he is male." This comment suggests that the Dead household is not unique in its mistreatment of women. It is merely symbolic of the preference families give to male children over female ones. Lena tries to drive this fact home to Milkman by making it clear to him that the only thing he has going for him is his sex and nothing else. These words reveal the frustration that women feel when they are made to act a certain way just because they are the less privileged sex. Lena falls a total victim to this, and makes no attempt to come out of it. Her fight with Milkman indicates that, like Ruth, she too has the potential to stand up to the men in the family, but does not feel the need to do so for herself. She represents the women who continue to be repressed and dominated by the males of the species, but do not give enough importance to their own selves to care to retaliate against the existing system and go in quest of their own identity.

Milkman's sisters are, however, not the only women who

7 Demetrakopoulos 95.
suffer because of his arrogant, domineering attitude. His association with Pilate's granddaughter, Hagar, has a drastic and fatally damaging effect on her. She gives up her life not only because he rejects her, but also because of the way he chooses to do it. Hagar's story reinforces the sad, harsh realities of the disastrous effects of white values on black culture. It demonstrates the disturbing extent to which young minority women have internalised the concepts of beauty and self-worth propagated by the majority culture. It also highlights the fact that male expectations of attractiveness and romance are based only on ideas sold to them by white culture. Milkman first sees his cousin when he visits his aunt Pilate's house for the first time. He watches Hagar drag a huge basket inside with her back toward him, and decides on the spot that he is in love with her: "but Milkman had no need to see her face; he had already fallen in love with her behind" (43). This very first meeting is symbolic, and sets the tone for the strange course the romance is later to take on. Milkman sees only Hagar's behind, i.e., he sees only a portion of her - not the complete picture. He thinks he is in love with her - without ever talking to her or trying to understand her. After going steady with her for over twelve years, he decides to end the relationship just as suddenly as he had begun it - with no input
from Hagar, or a word of explanation to her. He writes her a brief note on Christmas and encloses some money - expressing his "gratitude," thanking her for being his girlfriend for so long, and informing her that he would now like to call the relationship off. Hagar is shattered to learn that he has broken off the relationship, and stunned that he has used such distant, cold, formal words as “thank you” and “gratitude.” Later, when she sees him in a bar with another girl, “whose silky copper-colored hair cascaded over the sleeve of his coat” (127), she is unable to stand the shock, and goes insane with jealousy and desperation. She seeks revenge by trying to kill Milkman - and stalks him with an ice-pick or knife at the oddest of moments and in the strangest of places, but never succeeds. When her last attempt fails, she stands like a zombie - mute, and unaware of her surroundings. Guitar chances upon her and takes her home. He thinks it ironic that this “pretty little black-skinned girl” (307) should want to both kill for love and die for it. He blames Pilate and Reba for not realising that Hagar is not strong and self-sufficient like them. “Hagar was not...strong enough, like Pilate, nor simple enough, like Reba, to make up her life as they had. She needed what most colored girls needed: a chorus of mamas, grandmamas, aunts, cousins, sisters, neighbors, Sunday school teachers, best girl
friends, and what all to give her the strength life demanded of her
- and the humor with which to live it” (307). Reba and Pilate are
independent, self-confident women, but Hagar is not like them.
She has always been pampered by them, and requires their
support at every step. She also needs guidance from the women
mentioned above - women who make up the core of the black
community, and are capable of passing on its sustaining qualities
to her through their nurturing abilities. Hagar has been
conditioned, instead, by exposure to the majority culture, to think
of a successful woman as one who dresses up in chic clothes and
has men falling at her feet. Guitar’s words indicate that she needs
to surrender her prissy ways and become tuned to the values of
the black culture by associating with women who uphold them as
sacred. Hagar, however, can think of no company beyond
Milkman’s, and does not even know, perhaps, that he has left the
city for another part of the country to search for the gold his father
had told him about. She lies silently on her bed all day, and
refuses to eat, drink or go out - until Pilate gives her a pretty pink
plastic compact one day. As soon as she releases the clasp, and
sees a reflection of her face in the mirror inside, she is shocked.
“No wonder” (308) she says, and that’s all she can say several
times at first. When Pilate asks “No wonder what?” (308) she
replies “I look awful. No wonder he didn’t want me. I look terrible” (308). Edward Guerrero interprets Hagar’s looking into the mirror as an invocation of a “deadly, ensnaring, self-reflexive gaze into an alien standard of beauty.” It is unfortunate that even when a black girl looks into the mirror she sees only what is not there - fair skin, light eyes, straight hair - rather than what is - her history, her background, her culture reflected in her skin, her eyes, her hair. Guerrero contends, therefore, that by rejecting her reflection in the mirror, she rejects, essentially, “the self shaped by the traditions and lifestyles of...Pilate and...Reba, both of whom represent Nature...and...work against the allure of outward appearances and the colonizing powers of ‘the look.’ Hagar fantasizes a persona that she imagines will make her more desirable to...Milkman.” In a stubborn negation of all that Pilate and Reba stand for, Hagar detests her Negroid looks, and yearns for the kind of face and hair that she thinks Milkman would appreciate - smooth, pale skin and silky hair. She decides to get up and “fix” (308) herself up by going shopping for the latest in clothes and cosmetics. As she heads downtown, she keeps whispering to herself “no wonder” (310). The bedraggled image of herself sticks to her mind, and she blames it for her failed

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romance with Milkman. Morrison writes that Hagar “shopped for everything a woman could wear from the skin out...” (310). She first buys a garter belt, hose, nylon slips, shoes, a night-gown, a skirt and a blouse. Then she moves on to the cosmetics department which, Morrison writes, “enfolded her in perfume, and she read hungrily the labels and the promise. Myrurgia for primeval woman who creates for him a world of tender privacy where the only occupant is you...” (311). The author's description of Hagar's desperate shopping spree demonstrates the extent to which the white culture propagates the values of success based on materialism and a certain fixed concept of beauty. The underlying assumption is that a woman is worthy only if she is desirable to men - and they will find her attractive only if she lures them by the power of her clothes, make-up and perfume. Hagar tries to be alluring and beautiful for Milkman by attempting to diminish and tone down her African looks in favour of a more Westernised style. She circles the make-up counters where she sees “peachy powders and milky lotions...grouped in front of poster after cardboard poster of gorgeous grinning faces. Faces in ecstasy. Faces somber with achieved seduction. Hagar believed she could spend her life there among the cut glass, shimmering in peaches and cream, in satin. In opulence. In luxe. In love” (311). Western white culture
presents fantasy as reality, and hypnotises the consumer into believing that she too can enjoy the ecstasy that follows a successful seduction only if she has a peaches and cream complexion (guaranteed by their products) and lounges around in satin robes. Hagar falls a hapless victim to these calculated bates, and spends a fortune purchasing clothes and cosmetics so that she can achieve the desired look that would win Milkman's heart. Her desire to wear satin symbolises a direct rejection of her African heritage since black people have traditionally grown and worked on cotton plantations with pride. Cotton is a natural fabric, whereas satin is synthetic and connotes the artificial values of the white culture as opposed to genuine black values symbolised by cotton. Her inability to appreciate this difference, and her mindless pursuit of a thing that is at odds with her nature and culture, leads ultimately to a pathetic end to her life.

As she walks back home, she recalls the way she had felt when she had stared into the mirror in the compact.

Yet the momentum of the thing held her - it was all of a piece. From the moment she looked into the mirror in the little pink compact she could not stop. It was as though she held her breath and could not let it go until the energy and busyness culminated in a beauty that would
dazzle him...she looked neither right nor left but
walked on and on, oblivious of other people,
street lights, automobiles, and a thunderous sky.

(313)

By depicting Hagar's complete obsession with her looks, Morrison shows a black girl totally besieged by the majority culture's concepts of beauty, attractiveness and self-worth - to the disturbing exclusion of all else. Hagar automatically assumes that her appearance is to blame for Milkman's rejection of her because she does not look like the women with peaches and cream complexions. This damages her self-esteem so much that she is unable to shake off the sight of her presumably ugly face staring back at her from the pretty compact. She concentrates so single-mindedly on this image that she becomes totally unaware of her surroundings, and realises that she has been completely drenched by a downpour only when one of her shopping bags splits, and everything begins to fall out. Morrison paints a pathetic picture of Hagar as she bends to retrieve one or two items while the others fall out. Her brand new white skirt becomes wet and muddy. The fashionable hose rips, and her expensive cosmetics mingle with the mud in the puddles before she scoops them all up again. Her inability to hold on to these chic, Western items symbolises the futility of her mission - her attempt to transform the ugly crow into the proverbially beautiful swan. Hagar
reaches home “limp, wet, and confused, clutching her bundles in whatever way she could” (314). She holds on to the tattered shopping bags as if they are a life-force keeping her from succumbing to the fatal misery of rejection, looking up to them for a new vitality and beauty that would give meaning to her existence. For this reason she rushes straight into her room and, without drying herself, puts on her new, dirty, soiled clothes, and plasters wet, lumpy make-up all over her face. It is only when she presents herself for Reba and Pilate’s inspection that she becomes aware of the pathos of her condition.

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

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

As Hagar's temperature rises, she murmurs deliriously, "Why don't he like my hair?....He likes silky hair....Silky hair the color of a penny....Curly, wavy, silky hair. He don't like mine" (315). Her obsession with the coarse texture and cut of her hair continues, and she holds it responsible for the estrangement with Milkman. Pilate makes an effort to convince her granddaughter that if Milkman has rejected her because of her hair and looks, he has done so in ignorance. She wants to make Hagar realise that her hair is her strength - the essence of her African origins. It is the thread that binds her to Milkman even without the commitment of romance because it is proof of the similarity of their culture and origins. For him to hate it would be to hate himself. Hagar, however, continues to insist that Milkman "loves silky hair....Penny-colored hair....And lemon-colored skin.... And gray-blue eyes....And thin nose....He's never going to like my hair" (315-316). The description she gives is that of a typical light-skinned beauty - with complexion and hair she now knows she can never have. These are the last desperate
words that Hagar speaks before her voice is silenced forever, and
her ugliness buried with her. She dies believing that she has failed
in life because she could not get Milkman's love since she never
possessed the traditional beauty that would make romance possible
and lend meaning to her existence. Susan Willis argues that
"Hagar's hysteria and death mark the limits of her assimilation into
bourgeoisie culture. Neither through withdrawal nor through
commodity consumption can [she] transform herself into an object.
Her marginality, by reason of race and lumpen background, is the
basis for her inalienable human dimension. As Morrison might
have put it, she is simply too black, too passionate, too human ever
to become reified."\(^9\) Willis interprets Hagar's inability to become
white-like as a failure to be commodified ("reified") and views it as
the reason for her failed initiation into bourgeoisie society. In spite
of her best efforts, her native cultural background - the inherited
essence of Africanism - keeps her from becoming an object of
appreciation for the male gaze. Hagar, unfortunately, is unable to
appreciate this fact, and instead of viewing the resistance as her
strength, allows it to become the reason for her doom.

Hagar's negative outlook and alarmingly low self image are
juxtaposed by Pilate's zest for life and her self-affirmation. The

\(^9\) Susan Willis, "Eruptions of Funk: Historicizing Toni Morrison," Toni Morrison:
Critical Perspectives Past and Present, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr., and K. A.
difference lies in the way each views herself against the culture to which she rightfully belongs, and the culture in which she has to live. Pilate rejects the very values that Hagar reveres. She looks with disdain on Western concepts of success and prosperity, and lives without modern amenities like electricity, gas and running water. She is different from the other women characters of the novel in several ways - the first being a freakish physical reality. She does not have a navel, and is rumoured to have birthed herself - since her mother dies seconds before she was born. She lives on the outskirts of town, and practices an unconventional profession - the illegal production and sale of home-made liquor. Unmarried by choice, she heads a strange house-hold of women consisting of her daughter Reba (a single mother who lives from “one orgasm to another” [150]) and a thoroughly spoilt granddaughter, Hagar. Reba has an uncanny knack for winning all sorts of contests, games and give-aways. As a result of being thus lucky she brings home interesting items ranging from a diamond ring to a year’s supply of groceries. Neither she nor her mother, however, lay much emphasis on material possessions, and are known for their generosity - often giving away to others whatever little they own. Pilate is possessive only about her bag of bones, her geography book, the rocks she has

collected from each place she visited during her twenty years of wandering, and her name which she wears in an earring made out of her mother's brass snuff box. These objects, and the owner's reverence toward them, indicate her strong ties to her past, and her veneration of the culture that has shaped her. Valerie Smith writes that "instead of repressing the past, she carries it with her in the form of her songs, her stories and her bag of bones. She believes that one's sense of identity is rooted in the capacity to look back to the past and synthesize it with the present; it is not enough simply to put it behind one and look forward." Though Pilate settles down in a predominantly white town where she has access to various contemporary comforts, she rejects them in favour of a simple, natural lifestyle. She does not view progress as something that involves a negation of history, and a concentration on only the future. Rather, she integrates her ethnicity into her present lifestyle and, by selecting emotional treasures over material wealth, braces herself against the onslaught of Western materialism which Macon Dead's family is prey to.

Morrison traces the formation of Pilate's unique sensibility through her traumatic childhood when she sees her father blown "five feet up into the air" (40) by some white men who wanted his

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farm, to her youth when she first discovers that it is not natural to be without a navel. Other people view her with suspicion because of this abnormality, but she never lets it damage her self-esteem. Smith argues that Pilate's "physical condition symbolizes her thorough independence of others;...she is...neither trapped nor destroyed by decaying values as her brother's family is. Like Macon she is self-made, but her self-creation departs from, instead of coinciding with, the American myth." Smith's contention is that the lack of a navel only reinforces the fact that just as Pilate needed no assistance to come into the world, so she needs none to live in it. By identifying herself as part of a larger African community, she is able to reject the imprisonment of white society which entraps Macon's family. Though both brother and sister have carved independent lives for themselves, their priorities are entirely different. Macon has deliberately internalised white values, and measures success in terms of money, property and social status. Pilate, on the other hand, derides such values and draws sustenance only from her memories of the past, her father's words, and a recognition of herself as part of a larger Negroid community. She does not allow the white West to dictate or dominate her lifestyle.

11 Smith 728.
Reed contends that Pilate “transcends...gender-related oppression...She can not only support and live happily within a woman-centered environment but she can also accept the love of men without being devastated by its absence.” Pilate has experienced love of the finest kind, and rejected it deliberately because she had felt that she would not be able to hide her navel-less stomach from a husband forever. She does not, however, allow this loss to hamper her growth - viewing it instead as something that frees rather than victimises her. This suggests that even early in life, when she is most vulnerable, she has both the confidence to stand alone and the ability to rise above traditional Western anxieties about women being incomplete without the support of a man. Unlike Ruth, Pilate rejects artificial Western values symbolised by table manners and hygiene - the cleanliness of only the body as opposed to that of the mind or spirit. She also places a high value on the words spoken by her dead father, and follows his advice as she interprets it. All these things connect her to her African past, and give her the sustenance required for surviving whole in a world given to the emptiness of etiquette and the artificiality of modern survival techniques.

Pilate's basic initiation into life thus puts her through

12 Reed 58
various tests - the most notable of which are poverty, communal isolation, and early orphaning - arising from the death of her parents, and separation from her older brother, Macon. She, however, emerges as a strong individual because she draws sustenance from her racial memories and never breaks the vital connection to her native agricultural past. This is why, though she can claim no umbilical cord that has linked her genealogically to traditional mother figures, she is the one, of all the female characters, who is most connected to her African heritage, and whose relationships with other people have always been nurturing ones. Her words are comforting, her touch is healing, and her concoctions or potions always work where other endeavours fail. Milkman is conceived because of the home-made herbal mixture she gives Ruth to put in Macon's food when she learns that they have not had a physical relationship since Dr. Foster's death. He is born because she thwarts Macon's attempts to force Ruth to abort him by placing on his office chair a male voodoo doll with a red circle painted on its stomach, and a small chicken bone stuck between its legs. She uses these traditional means to ensure both protection and privacy for Ruth - instead of going to the police or a social welfare organisation which would have violated the latter without guaranteeing the former. Just as she plays a crucial role in
bringing Milkman into the world, so she instils in him a craving to
discover his true identity and roots, to go in search of his name, to
trace his origins back to his rich African past so that he can shed
the false illusions he has been brought up with, and be able to
surrender to the air so that he can ride it.

This process begins early - when Milkman is twelve years old,
and Guitar takes him to Pilate's house for the first time. She
reprimands him for saying "hi" - contending that the word should be
used only for calling pigs and sheep not human beings. Her
contempt for this common white word of greeting suggests her
resistance to a blind acceptance of the ways of the dominant culture.
By condemning this one word, she condemns, ironically, the entire
system of education that has traditionally claimed to civilise her
and her ilk. Referring to the significance of Pilate's name, several
critics have asserted that she acts as a literal pilot who shows
Milkman the way out of the snobbish, elitist white world and leads
him to a genuine appreciation of his rich ethnic origins. Peter
Bruck contends that "Pilate emerges as Milkman's pilot, guiding
him...out of the deathworld of his parents towards his true destiny,
i.e. the discovery of his African heritage." 13 Bruck refers to Macon

13 Peter Bruck. "Returning to One's Roots: The Motif of Searching and Flying in
and Ruth's world as a "deathworld" because it encompasses only hollow values related to the amassment of material wealth and lays emphasis on a decadent, artificial, bourgeoisie lifestyle. It does not throb with the pulse of life, love, caring, and the richness of natural values as Pilate's household does. Milkman, therefore, needs genealogical guidance from his aunt to emerge out of this Hades-like environment, and breathe the free air of his sweet cultural heritage.

Though Pilate's life is full of creditable deeds, her greatest failure is her inability to instil in her beloved granddaughter, Hagar, the authentic African values she herself holds so sacred. In *Tar Baby*, Ondine, similarly, fails to inculcate in Jadine the values that are of utmost importance to her. Both texts appear to suggest that the young woman's alienation from her ethnic culture is also a consequence of over-indulgence by black mother figures. At the same time, however, this inadequacy on the part of women like Pilate and Ondine makes them somehow more human and more identifiable. Pilate's one failure is devastating for Hagar and ultimately marks for her the difference between life and death. As her granddaughter gives up her life in desperation, Pilate turns the Christian funeral service into a genuine African ritual at the end of which she declares passionately, as if trying to
convince herself along with the rest of the congregation, “And she was loved” (319). Reed observes that “through her actions, Pilate rejected the empty Christian sermonizing. Her references were to activities Hagar shared with the living: the music, the morning and the evening.” This comment suggests that Pilate chooses to perform Hagar’s last rites in true African fashion - more in keeping with her own preferences. She thus brings an element of warmth and compassion to an otherwise impersonal, rigidly prim and proper ceremony so far removed from the way she and her family have always lived. Most importantly, however, by manipulating the funeral service, Pilate does for Hagar in death what she could not do for her in life - integrates her into African culture and reclaims for her the ethnic heritage she had, unfortunately, never learned to acknowledge during her lifetime. Pilate also performs another duty for her granddaughter when she presents a shoe box full of Hagar’s hair to Milkman on his return from the South. A matured and mellow Milkman, just back from a journey which has helped him rediscover himself, has already realised the magnitude of his folly and receives the box with gratitude - promising to hold on to the hair as a prized possession. Smith explains that “Milkman, insensitive to Hagar and unwilling

14 Reed 59.
to accept responsibility for her in life, understands her posthumously and assumes the burden of her death....[he] resolve[s] to carry with him the box of Hagar's hair: a symbol of his newly acquired cyclical vision of a past he no longer needs to escape."\(^{15}\) After his journey, Milkman has learned to appreciate both the larger and the immediate community of black women surrounding him. He has also attained a new selfhood by assimilating himself into his past, and by recognising the real value of his ethnic background which he had previously shunned for white, upper-class values. His acceptance of Hagar's hair signifies a victory for Pilate not only because she succeeds in exorcising her granddaughter's unrequited-love ghost but also because it indicates that she has finally handed down to her nephew the priceless legacy of his African heritage. He is now able to understand why the hair is as much part of him as it was part of her, and finally realises the value of the tresses he could not cherish while Hagar was alive.

Milkman also reveals to Pilate the intricate messages contained in her father's words which she had hitherto been misinterpreting, and stuns her by the revelation that she has, in fact, been carrying his bones around rather than those of the

\(^{15}\) Smith 731.
white man. He then takes her back to Virginia so that she can bury the bones on Solomon's Leap. It is here that Guitar, who has come in search of Milkman, shoots him, and kills Pilate. As she lies dying, she tells Milkman, "I wish I'd a knowed more people....If I'd a knowed more, I would a loved more" (336). Even her last words are about other people - indicating her selfless devotion to the black community - and her willingness to sacrifice her self in its service. She wants to embrace all humanity - to pass on the priceless value of the African cultural heritage to the black world before she departs from it. As Milkman bends over her, she asks him to sing to her. For the first time in his entire life, Milkman raises his voice in song. He renders for her the Sugargirl version of her favourite Sugarman song - the song of Shalimar (Solomon) which has already conveyed its legendary wisdom to the singer and helped him define himself genealogically and communally. As Pilate breathes her last, Milkman finally understands that "without ever leaving the ground, she could fly" (336). This understanding is compounded by the image of a bird which scoops Pilate's earring in its beak, and flies away. Milkman realises that Pilate could fly because she was without vanity, without complexes, and not bound to the ground by earthly possessions or materialistic desires. She had, instead, the rare
quality of detachment that allowed her to soar far above the rest of the world. She was one of the mythic flying Africans who could rise above the literal and metaphorical enslavement to white society and fly back to the freedom of their African past and ethnic origins.

Just as Milkman had retraced Pilate’s footsteps through his journey South, so now he replicates her metaphorical flight by a literal flight of his own. He knows that Guitar is lurking around some undefined corner, waiting to shoot him, but he vaults into the air from Solomon’s Leap because now he knows “what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it” (337). Milkman takes a calculated risk by giving himself up to the air because he is now confident that he has all the assets required to tame it, control it and ride it - i.e. he is now eligible to return to Africa because he has understood its value, and is willing to make the supreme sacrifice that such a going back would entail. His heart is both heavy with sorrow and buoyant with joy. Though Pilate’s loss is distressing, his body feels light with the weightlessness of relinquished material possessions and petty bourgeois concerns. He has finally justified his African existence by linking his individual self to the black community, and viewing himself as an extension of it. He has given up the false vanity and
pride that characterised his childhood and youth, and has become re-racinated after having first been de-racinated.

This chapter is not about Milkman's exemplary awakening, however, but about the women who shaped his quest and made such a self-discovery possible. Roberta Rubenstein asserts that Morrison "portrays a hero who achieves manhood by assimilating a traditionally female moral perspective into his previously limited vision...the sacrifices on his behalf by Pilate and others generate his own sense of himself as part of a community to which he belongs by reciprocal responsibility."16 Milkman is able to define himself as an individual only because of the contributions of the remarkable women he has come in contact with. It is Pilate whose words and stories make him realise that there is another world out there - just wanting to be rediscovered, and Lena whose accusations finally send him on the all-important treasure hunt for gold. What he discovers, instead, is a much greater wealth of folklore and family history. As he begins to initiate himself back into the African community so far from home, his understanding of the women he has left behind increases and turns into compassion and respect. He is finally able to sympathise with his mother, feel concerned about Hagar, and respect his sisters for

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16 Roberta Rubenstein, "Pariahs and Community," Gates and Appiah 151
who they are. His rediscovery of his selfhood and new identity as a black man is compounded by a new awareness of these women in his life whom he had always taken for granted.

In *Song of Solomon*, therefore, Morrison seems to have scored a double victory. The main character is male, but he becomes a complete man only because of the direct and indirect but always powerful influences of the women in his family. These women themselves grow, develop and change - though not necessarily for the better - because of Milkman's involvement in their lives. After finally laying her dead father's ghost by burying his bones, Pilate dies secure in the knowledge that she has ultimately understood the message contained in the words he always repeated to her. Hagar dies posthumously appreciated by Milkman, and one hopes that her ghost will rest in peace. Lena and Ruth continue in pretty much the same way, but both have redeemed themselves slightly. Lena has finally released her pent-up anger at Milkman, and Ruth has atoned for his deplorable act by ensuring a decent burial for Hagar. Corinthians emerges as the most successful of the Dead women (excluding Pilate) because she appreciates her new identity, and begins living with Porter in a small, ramshackle house. Morrison reiterates in the end that the women who define themselves in terms of their ethnic heritage
and larger community do not need to validate their existence by the presence of such externals as the compulsory love of a man, a craving for material wealth or the desire to be beautiful by majority standards. This suggests, ultimately, that the women who deride their blackness or try not to acknowledge it fail in life - like Hagar and Ruth. Those who view it with pride from the beginning or learn to respect it later, find in it their greatest strength and their happiest reason for living - or dying.