



## Materialism and Cultural Quest: A Study of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*

Dr Satender Kumar

Email: [Satya197902@yahoo.com](mailto:Satya197902@yahoo.com)

**Abstract:** Culture is an illustration of history, traditions, customs, myths and values of a society. Survival of a society depends upon its affiliation with its cultural heritage and continuous development with time. Colonialism had a major impact on the culture of the colonised country. How a colonizing culture affects the native culture is studied under cultural studies. It is apt to study the role of cultural heritage and historical alienation in development of African Americans in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) with reference to theories of cultural studies.

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### Introduction:

Culture is a portrayal of the traditions and reflection of the experiences of a society. It is a process of continuous improvement of human behaviour to achieve common standard and acceptable beliefs, values and traditions of a society. Culture is “part of the general process which creates conventions and institutions through which the meanings that are valued by the community are shared and made active.” (Hall, 33)

Every society has its own history, customs, laws and arts which are essential components of a culture. They live their life according to the rules and beliefs of society. Culture, according to anthropologist E.B. Tylor, is “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” (7)

Culture develops continuously for the betterment of the society but never changes abruptly from set of social traditions, beliefs and customs. Culture can be divided into physical and spiritual culture. Physical aspects of a Culture are expressed through the architecture of the society where as spiritual culture is an expression of their beliefs, moral laws, customs, values and traditions. As Paul James said that:

Culture is defined as a social domain that emphasizes the practices, discourses and material expressions, which, over time, express the continuities and discontinuities of social meaning of a life held in common. (53)

There are three layers of culture which changes the behavior patterns and perceptions of a society. First, Cultural traditions differentiate one society from others. When we talk about the Indian, Chinese or African culture, we are discussing about the common language, traditions, and beliefs that make these people different from each others. In most of the cases, the people of one culture share behaviour patterns of other culture because they acquired it from their parent or family member who had gained it.

The second layer which makes the identity of a person is subculture. In Today's cosmic world, people come from the different parts of the world retain their original cultural traditions. Their original cultural traits set them apart from the rest of the society and these traits of language, tradition, experience and behaviour are common to a subculture. Examples of such type of subculture are found as African American, Indian American and Chinese American in the United State of America.

The third layer of Culture is the universal similarities. Every culture classifies people according to age and has blood relations as the closest bond. Most cultures people's language has set of rules and sounds for making a meaningful sentence and religion is an important part of culture through which a member of a society aspire to attain spirituality. These types of similarities are found in every culture across the world.

Cultures are continuously developing and change themselves according to the requirement of time and place. A Culture cannot be replaced by another culture as replacement of culture is considered as superiority of the values and standard of the other culture. Due to interaction with other cultures, there may be some changes in the values and practices of the native culture. Imperialism had a major impact on the culture of the colonised country. How a colonizing culture affects the native culture is studied under cultural studies.

Cultural studies is a field of research which includes culture, history, gender, race, sociology, Marxism, Post colonialism, anthropology and political science. The origin of cultural studies lies with the Center for Contemporary cultural studies at Birmingham University, UK. The department of cultural studies



was established by Prof. Richard Hoggart in 1964. But the pioneering works of cultural studies came from Stuart Hall when he takes over the center from Professor Hoggart. In Cultural studies, different authors have different understanding. Raymond William considers culture as “a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period or a group”. (90) Cultural studies consider culture neither aesthetically nor humanistic but as a political project. John Frow and Morris consider Culture “not as organic expression of community, nor as an autonomous sphere of aesthetic forms, but as a contested and conflictual set of practices of representation bound up with the process of formation and re-formation of social group.” (2)

The best political concept of culture in regard to cultural studies expressed by Stuart Hall as:

an arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured. It is not a sphere where socialism, a socialist culture- already fully formed – might be simply “expressed”. But it is one of the places where socialism might be constituted. That is why “popular culture matter.” (Hall, 239)

The basic theory of cultural studies is Marxist which affects it in two ways. First, to understand the meaning of culture, one has to analyse the relationship between the social structure and history of a society. The social structure and history of a society are interwoven together into one as pointed out by Raymond William as “history and text are inscribed in each other and are embedded together as a part of same process.” (3) The importance of the culture lies in the shaping and structuring the history of a society. Second, cultural studies assume that capitalist societies are divided unequally along the line of gender, generation and class. Culture is site where there is continuous struggle to impose meaning over subordinate group by dominant group. It is this which makes culture hegemonic.

In cultural studies, this concept of hegemony or ideology is established as articulation by Stuart Hall within the framework of Gramsci’s concept of hegemony. By the theory of articulation, Hall means that “cultural text and practices are not inscribed with meaning guaranteed once and for all by the intentions of production; meaning is always the result of an articulation.” (4) Thus, meaning of content has to be expressed in a specified context. Thus, in cultural studies, the culture is site of ideological struggle where hegemony is to be won or lost.

As a writer inspired by such a noble vision, **Toni Morrison**, one of the foremost contemporary African-American women novelists, tries to project the black experience and celebrates the black community. Toni Morrison’s novels reclaim their past from the oppressive history. The pursuit for their cultural heritage has compelled Morrison to rewrite the past and forgotten cultural history and this reclamation has been realized through the rewriting the erased cultural traditions. Toni Morrison’s novels reveal the healing power of folklore and traditions and their importance in resisting cultural hegemony. Thus, Morrison’s works depicts the effects of white cultural hegemony as the universal stereotype on the lives of black people.

Morrison’s narrative registers the historical experience of resistance and acceptance of white culture by black people. *Song of Solomon* (1977) by Toni Morrison is one of her fictions which reveal the adverse effects of accepting the dominant cultural values and traditions as well as the exploration of African American culture and values as pointed out by Bandler as:

bridges the information gap between the black experience mirrored in legends and century old history and the contemporary black generation that knows little about the glory amidst the tribulations. (28)

*Song of Solomon* (1977) narrates the story of a black family of Macon Dead and his wife Ruth Foster with their children, Macon Dead III or Milkman Dead, Corinthians, Lena, and Pilate, the aunt of Milkman and her daughter Reba and granddaughter Hager. The two families are contrasted against each other for their cultural traditions and values. Milkman, the protagonist of the novel is contrasted against his friend Guitar Baines who grew up deprived and bitter.

Myths of superiority of dominating group over Black society are created by the ideologies that have their basis in hierarchal distinctions of colour, class, sex, caste and religion. These ideologies work insidiously among marginalized group to erode their cultural heritage and beliefs, while in return this marginalized group receives a crippled culture. Self destructive nature of black culture is seen in Guitier Baines’s words to Milkman as:

Listen, baby, people do funny things. Specially us. The cards are stacked against us and just trying to stay in the game, stay alive and in the game, makes us do funny things. Things we can’t help. Things that make us hurt one another. We don’t even know why. (Morrison, SOS, 87)



Macon Dead's family is a model of black capitalism. Macon is the city's most affluent black property owner leading a life governed by greed and acquisitiveness. His possessiveness for money and power, his desire to advance himself are totally features of the dominant capitalist culture that surrounds him. Fearing that his son Milkman may be influenced by Pilate's unhealthy, unmaterialistic ways, Macon advises him, "let me tell you right now the one important thing you'll ever need to know. Own things." (Morrison, SOS, 55) Macon's wife, Ruth, is as elitist as her husband. As the only daughter of the most important Negro in the city, Dr. Foster, she has become accustomed to luxury all her life. Her father is a classic example of the black bourgeoisie.

Morrison's main focus is on Ruth Foster and Pilate who are just opposite to each other. Ruth is society lady who follow the custom and values of dominant society where as Pilate is totally outside the society as per dominant cultural values as symbolized by her house outside the town as:

a narrow single-story house whose basement seemed to be rising from rather than settling into the ground. She had no electricity because she would not pay for the service. Nor for gas. At night she and her daughter lit the house with candles and kerosene lamps; they warmed themselves and cooked with wood and coal, pumped kitchen water into a dry sink through a pipeline from a well and lived pretty much as though progress was a word that meant walking a little farther on down the road. (Morrison, SOS, 27)

The portrayal of self-sufficiency of native culture is made through the immense personality of Pilate who is the embodiment of the spirit of her community. By contrasting Ruth and Pilate, Morrison wants to suggest that the effect of dominant cultural practice of class distinction and fragmentation can be overcome by the women in their extra concerns for their cultural traditions and values. Ruth is a black image of dominant class lady who follow all the custom and traditions of the white society. She was brought up according to the custom of the white society by her father who is the only black doctor in the town. She is totally cut off from her native cultural values. She was married Macon Dead due to her class position in the society as he is also guided by the white standards. She was despised by her husband for her weakness as:

Like the keeper of the lighthouse and the prisoner, she regarded it as a mooring, a checkpoint, some stable visual object that assured her that world was still there; that this was life not a dream. (Morrison, SOS, 11)

Whereas Pilate is a woman completely outside the established structure of the dominant society. She is bearer of the traditions of her family and is the guiding star of Milkman in his journey to know his cultural and historical roots. Morrison compares Ruth and Pilate as:

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

They nourish Milkman physically as well spiritually. Ruth gave birth to Milkman and fed her milk and Pilate guides him in his spiritual development by stressing on the values of cultural tradition and heritage in life.

Milkman, the only protagonist of novels of Toni Morrison is brought up by his father according to the materialistic culture of the white society when he says that :

Let me tell you right now the one important thing you'll ever need to know: Own things. And let the things you own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too. (Morrison, SOS, 55)

Milkman lives a life in alienation from himself and from her ancestral rootedness because he follows the excessively materialistic values. He is unable to advance spiritually until he acknowledges his ancestral past. His search for his past confirm the need to re-establish the connection with past in order to healthy survival. As Toni Morrison's statement regarding the theme of the novel as:

Truth compels one to get in touch with his or her Heritage in order to comprehend and appreciate one's true self and establish a higher quality Existence – one that does not necessary include or Preclude material wealth. (Mujahid, 124)

Milkman is isolated from his community and the awareness of national events that affects the African people. When he was informed about the murder of the fourteen year old Till, a murder by all people including European as well as African were shocked, Milkman answers: "Yeah, well, fuck Till. I am the one in trouble." (Morrison, SOS, 88) This reflects the effect of the dominant cultural materialism on Milkman and his feeling



towards their fellow Africans. For him, like his father, wealth is good for life. He has little regard for his community and traditions. He should get rid of this attitude and love his community and custom like Pilate who “gave up, apparently, all interest in table manners or hygiene, but acquired a deep concern for and about human relationships.” (Morrison, SOS, 149)

The need of the awareness for Milkman by Toni Morrison about his race, traditions and relationship with community is reflected through his confrontation with police. He overwhelmed with shame when stripped off dignity like millions of African around the world as:

Shame at being spread-eagle, fingered, and handcuffed. Shame at having stolen, like a kid on a Halloween trick-or-treat prank rather than a grown man making a hit. Shame at needing both his father and his aunt to get him off.... But nothing was like shame he felt as he watched and listened to Pilate. Not just her Aunt Jamima act, but the fact that she was both adept at it and willing to do it –for him. (Morrison, SOS, 209)

After this incident, Milkman sees more dignity and life in poor Pilate than a rich father Macon and realize the effect of capitalism or materialism which emphasis on money and status on African people who associated with its values.

Milkman’s awareness about his culture, community and the natural world around him leads him to reevaluate his family and his neighbourhood. He sees his father’s distorted ambitions and pathetic condition of his mother. He changed his perception about his mother and his aunt, Pilate who nourished him physically and spiritually as:

The two exceptions were both women, both black, both old. From the beginning, his mother and Pilate had fought for his life and he had never so much as made either of them a cup of tea. (Morrison, SOS, 331)

After realization of cultural heritage and self, he feels loneliness as pointed out by Wilfred D. Samuels that Milkman has become “...one, who has been shaped not only solely by his environment, but his distinct choices and actions. (67) His cultural lineage realizes him the artificial values of materialistic culture as:

There is nothing here to help him – not money, his car, his father’s reputation, his suit, or his shoes. In fact they hampered him. (Morrison, SOS, 277)

There is change in his perception about African American cultural values. Earlier he valued his freedom and power and now he values the families’ ties. He searches for his family history. His awareness of his people made him to look into a new society which governed by the traditions and customs of African American people as “he had stopped evading things, sliding through, over and around difficulties.” (Morrison, SOS, 271)

Through the character of Pilate, Morrison reconstructed the core values of African culture. Communal values of personal relationship are more important to Pilate than the materialistic acquisitions. She always helps the people of her community with her emotional generosity. She believes that one should remember one’s past as it exists in a dynamic relationship with present. She, therefore, carries her history, folktale, and her form of songs as she tells her brother Macon as:

You can’t take a life and walk off and leave it. Life is life. Precious. And the dead you kill is yours. They stay with you anyway, in your mind. So it’s better thing, a better thing to have the bones right there with you wherever you go. That way, it frees up your mind. (Morrison, SOS, 208)

Pilate is portrayed in the role of a mentor. She plays a role of spiritual leader of the society and a special teacher for Milkman who taught him the values of African history and culture. It can be argued that she is main reason behind the Milkman’s liberation from the capitalist values. She imparts the humanistic education which is necessary for milkman to be good human being in the society. Being connected to her heritage and traditions, she changes Milkman from money monger to a complete man who respects other blacks as human beings.

Toni Morrison uses myth to highlight the importance of cultural traditions and values. Myth and ideology are essential parts of a human culture. Stotkin points out that ideology is an abstraction of the systems of beliefs, values, and institutional relationships that characterize a particular culture whereas mythology is the body of traditional narratives that exemplifies and historicizes ideology. Myths are stories, drawn from history, that have acquired through usage over many generations a symbolizing function central to the culture of the society that produces them. Myth suggests that by understanding and imaginatively reenacting the conflict resolutions of the past, we can interpret and control the unresolved conflicts of the present. Toni Morrison through her novel *Song of Solomon* (1977) wants to transmit the mixture of new information and old traditions to new generation.



As culture is result of social relations in a society. It has deep connection with class formation, sexual division and racial structuring of the society. Johnson explains culture as:

Cultural processes are intimately connected with social relations, especially with class relations and class formations, with sexual divisions, with the racial structuring of social relations and age oppressions as a form of dependency. Second is that culture involves power and helps to produce asymmetries in the abilities of individuals and social groups to define and realize their needs. And third, which follows the other two, is that culture is neither an autonomous nor an externally determined field, but a site of social differences and struggles. (3)

Milkman and her sisters are brought up according to the culture and traditions of dominant white society and not connected to their African history and traditions. As per white materialistic culture, they did not consider blacks as human beings. Milkman considers black women as his need providers and did not have any concern for their sufferings as pointed out by his sisters as:

You've been laughing at us all your life.... Using us, ordering us, and judging us: how we cook your food; how we keep your house. ... Our girlhood was spent like a found nickel on you. When you slept, we were quit; when you were hungry, we cooked; when you wanted to play, we entertained you; and when you got grown enough to know the difference between a woman and a two-toned Ford, everything in this house stopped for you. ... and to this day, you never asked one of us if we were tired, or sad, or wanted a cup of coffee. (Morrison, SOS, 215)

Milkman's sisters are not mature enough in their work and behaviour and no one want to marry them as point out as:

It had been assumed that she and Magdalene called Lena would marry well - but hopes for Corinthians were especially high since she'd gone to college. Her education had taught her how enlightened mother and wife, able to contribute to the civilization or in her case, the civilizing of her community... High toned and high yellow ... Corinthians was a little too elegant ... Magdalene called Lena seemed resigned to her life but when Corinthians woke up one day to find herself a forty two year old maker of rose petals ... she made up her mind to get out of the house. (Morrison, SOS, 188-189)

Toni Morrison explores the significance of the tradition of naming in African culture through name of the characters in *Song of Solomon* (1977). There are several significant instances where black tradition emphasizes on the process of naming. The best example is naming of Pilate as her name describes her as she wears it literally and chosen according to the African American tradition of selecting a name of a new born child from the Bible. Her father was illiterate and put his finger first even the midwife advised him against the 'Christ killing Pilate' (Morrison, SOS, 19). Her name illustrates the quality Pilate bears as she saves the life of Milkman and helped other black women in trouble. The other example is Mercy Hospital which denies the admission to black which is contrary to its name and nick named by African American as No Mercy Hospital. The neighbouring area of hospital is known as Blood Bank "because blood flowed so freely there". (Morrison, SOS, 32) The regaining the true identity is most vital aspect for those who were named during the period of slavery by their master as Guitar clarifies to Milkman as "niggers get their names the way they get everything else – the best way they can." (Morrison, SOS, 88)

Supernatural occurrences are important aspect of the African American culture which presented throughout the novel by Toni Morrison. Morrison's focus on the 'discredited' knowledge of African American past and African's notion of reincarnation provides the alternate reality presented through the cultural discourse in the novel. Morrison expressed he views about acceptance of supernatural in African heritage in *Song of Solomon* (1977) as:

I could blend the acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world at the same time with neither taking precedence over other. It is indicative of the cosmology, the way in which Black people looked at the world. We are very practical people... but within that practicality we also accepted what I suppose could be called superstition and magic, which is another way of knowing things...? And some of those things were 'discredited knowledge' that Black people, had; discredited only because Black people were discredited therefore what they knew was 'discredited...' That knowledge has a very strong place in my work. (Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation", 342)

*Song of Solomon* (1977) demonstrates the significance of African American's cultural history in their liberation from the clutch of racial and class oppression. Milkman has started his journey in hunt of gold under the effect of his father's materialistic culture which resulted into the realization of ancestral culture and



history. His knowledge of his ancestral history and culture liberates him from hegemonic white culture and imbued in him the feeling of community and respect for the fellow black men and women.

Morrison described the personal and community impact of erasure of history and culture in the life of marginalized and oppressed blacks. Through the reclamation of his history and culture, Milkman, the protagonist of the novel develops into a self asserting and finds his self worth with help of Pilate. In the course of Milkman's evolution, Morrison reveals the negative effects of capitalism, racism and alienation of an individual from his ancestral history and culture.

Like a mythological figure, only Pilate is able to observe and understand the importance of her ancestral African American history and culture. She connects Milkman to his ancestors through stories which reveal the history of a century. The dying words of Pilate highlights the significance of community as integral part of African American culture in development as she says, "I wish I'd a knowed more people. I would [have] loved 'em all. If I'd a knowed more, I would a loved more." (Morrison, SOS, 336)

Thus, the theme of novel is the journey of Milkman towards self discovery as a black man, as he slowly piece together the history of his ancestors, which he discovers by journeying into the past of his father and his aunt and searching for his origins where he discovers the greatness of African American heritage, culture and the nature of love and faith. The series of wondering of Milkman become a kind of cultural epic by which black people can recall their often buried slave heritage. Like Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976), it explains the significance of African American consciousness and acceptance of their history and culture in order to free themselves from racism and classism. The power of the novel is in Morrison's use of black mythology and the strength of its elements of black culture.

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