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*'Song of Solomon': Approaching Identity through the
Myth of the Flying African*

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Abstract

The representation of the African American community in literature has always been considered debatable due to its history of slavery. Notwithstanding, authors like Toni Morrison have attempted to create a new way of describing the members of this community bearing in mind the differences between the same group. Thus, focusing on one particular character of the novel, this paper seeks to explore the way in which the protagonist Milkman of *Song of Solomon* (1977) by Toni Morrison evolves and creates his identity anew through the “Flying African” myth. The presence of the myth and its synthesis with cultural aspects such as orature, story-telling, naming and ancestry will be the ideal trigger for the new identity to be fulfilled. There will be a transition from past to present that will lead the main character to acknowledge his own past by embracing what had been previously disallowed by the mainstream. Firstly, there will be a brief reference to the myth in the African American cultural context and then, the main focus of this paper will be the analysis of the gradual evolution undertaken by the protagonist through the myth.

Key words: Flying African myth, Orature, Story-telling, Naming, Ancestry

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1. Introduction

Toni Morrison has been recently described as “one of the most influential writers in American history” (Li 2010, 12) and whose literature has been characterized by her rewriting of Black history from the inside. In her novels, Morrison analyses thoroughly the black community in a western context, and their struggle to be adapted by a non-native land: “For the Africans transported to the American continent as slaves, the preservation of their African heritage was more problematic and has developed into a central concern in contemporary fiction” (Noriega 2002, 188). American contemporary writers, and Toni Morrison herself, have helped to preserve legends and myths of African history by writing them down in different ways; through fiction, these authors strengthen their cultures and identities and preserve African ancestral culture. Thus, one of Morrison's main aim is to recover black ancestral culture through her writing, and this is clearly seen in the novel *Song of Solomon* (1977). This paper intends to prove that the main character of Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* creates a new notion of identity supported by the “Flying African” myth.

Morrison, influenced by the Black Aesthetic movement of the 60s, wanted to unite American and African cultures and search for a distinct African-American voice. And she will do so, by explaining the story of an African-American guy, Milkman, through the myth of the “Flying African”. The question of identity appears to be a challenging task when talking about immigrant groups. Therefore, Morrison's particular depiction of African community teaches us that not only there is division between white and black communities, but also within a same one. This aspect makes Morrison's writing so unique, and it offers different ways of adapting oneself into the new location, which might be by assimilating the dominant culture or by challenging it, creating their own view of identity. Therefore, identity by Morrison is seen as innovative, as she tries to reconstruct completely the western view of identity seen as something static. Identity will be the final purpose, and the myth of the “Flying African” will serve as an alternative for doing it. Together with the myth, there will be other remarkable elements related to African culture and folklore that will facilitate this ultimate quest. As David Cowart claims in his essay “Faulkner and Joyce in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*”: “Morrison's 1977 novel *Song of Solomon* concerns the black experience in America over four generations, and in what follows, I mean to consider this novel's exploration of black themes

[...] of history, identity, and freedom” (Coward 2000, 95).

The starting point will be to study the presence of "The Flying African" myth in the African American context, taking into account Magic Realism, with “the aim of preserving and passing on a past which has often been trivialised or erased” (Noriega 2002, 190). Using magic elements in the novel such as the myth, as it will be later seen, has proved to be the aid to recover cultural values that were lost due to slavery. The combination of magic and cultural aspects such as orature, story-telling as a means of transmitting one's culture, the community and its strong connection to naming, will be the perfect frame for identity to be fulfilled. Last but not least, ancestry in black community will be given a special importance, since the rediscovery of ancestors is essentially linked to the myth. Following an afro-centric approach which “exposes what has been hidden by dominant discourse” (Wilentz 1992, 62), this paper will place African culture in a central position. Notions of postcolonial studies will also be present due to Morrison's intention of recovering the voice of the colonised, the African American descendants. Finally, this piece of research will mainly focus on the evolution the main character of the novel will undergo, following Morrison's reinterpretation of the “Flying African” myth. The main characters of the novel, Milkman and Pilate, and their relationship and quest towards a redefinition of identity will be studied profoundly as well as how the myth serves, at the end, as circular structure for the whole novel.

2. Brief study of “The Flying African” myth in the African American Cultural Context

The legend or myth of the “Flying African” has been commonly used in African American literatures to depict the collective resistance overtaken by African slaves and to give significance to their experience. Slaves in the new land decided to fly to their homelands by means of water, with their own wings or, in some cases, simply by committing suicide. What really mattered was their choice to not kneeling down for slavery and leaving it behind. There are different versions of this myth in literature; for example *People Who Could Fly* by Julius Lester, in which he writes: “It didn't matter. At least they were no longer slaves” (Lester 1970, 21). Lester emphasizes the fact that it does not matter if slaves flew away, walk, or drown in the ocean, what mattered was that there were free from subjugation.

Due to slavery, African society grew with the need of reinforcing their identities and their own ancestral culture. During those upheavals, slaves lost their real names; so, the only option they had to strengthen the culture that was being dismissed by the dominant one was to tell their stories and experiences orally, from generation to generation. It is for this reason that orature and story-telling are essential, since they had no other means to transmit their culture to the world. The “elders” or grandmothers had the power to transmit and contribute to community's culture; as they provide a bridge between past and new generations and give names. Women were the responsible to provide the community with a name, since they had been erased due to slavery. Thus, what contemporary women writers such as Toni Morrison do is to give a chance to the legends to be written down, and to give women storytellers the attention they deserve (Alonso Gallo 2001). Therefore, ancestors in African mythology play an important role: “African religion depicted as a triangle: man must live in harmony with all the powers that affect his life, family and work” (Parrinder 1967, 15). This suggests that community must bring ancestors together in order to feel fulfilled and contented with the world; due to the fact that the power of ancestry is linked to the African ancestor's ability to go beyond slavery and fly towards Africa (Wilentz 1990).

All along with this myth, it comes the presence of Magic Realism, which is part of African heritage. It is relevant to mention that African culture relies on the presence of magic, including rituals, songs, superstitions, or other supernatural elements. For this reason, the mixture of reality and magic give shape to *Song of Solomon* (1977), since slavery was a fact, and the presence of magic elements such as the myth help to create a redefinition of the term and to construct the identity of African American society which had been previously denied by the mainstream. Taking this into consideration, Morrison's novel will demonstrate that this myth is still alive and it still contributes to the folk and culture of African community nowadays.

3. *Song of Solomon* (1977) by Toni Morrison: Milkman's Development through the Myth

Morrison's use of myth in *Song of Solomon* is present from the very beginning, and readers will be given constant references to it throughout the novel. The novel starts with the

insurance agent Robert Smith's suicide jumping off Mercy Hospital, which is the first sight of flying; and it will end with Solomon's song in Shalimar and Milkman's final flight. Although in the first pages readers start to learn about the protagonist and his peculiar birth and context, it is not until the end of the novel that they are provided with the whole story of the "Flying Africans", which occurs when Milkman travels to the south of the country. Therefore, in order to reach a clear understanding of Milkman, the main character, and Pilate, his guide, their evolution and relationship will be studied in relation to their context and other relevant characters.

Song of Solomon is set in North Carolina, where the Dead family lives. However, as the novel moves forward, the setting will be the south, in Virginia, where the ancestors of this family remain. This movement from North to South will be constant in the novel, and from the very beginning readers may find allusions to it: "The North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance agent promised to fly from Mercy to the other side of Lake Superior at three o'clock" (Morrison 1977, 3). These locations allude to the movement that immigrants carried out in the past, and the homecoming to Africa (Noriega 2002, 49). Coming from African American ancestors, Milkman's family consists of his father Macon Dead, his mother Ruth, and his two sisters Magdalene called Lena and First Corinthians. They all live in opposition to Pilate's family, formed by Pilate, Reba, and Hagar. In fact, one family could be defined in opposition to the other; Macon Dead's living space is characterized by constrain, greyish environment and western vision. Contrary to Pilate's home, which is seen as free, lively and a keeper of African values and traditions. This shows a strong division between the African communities in America, and more specifically, in this black community in the north, in which the westernised group assimilating the mainstream culture is represented by Macon Dead's family, and the Africanised, the ones in charge of preserving African heritage, represented by Pilate's family. However, even Macon Dead seems to feel tempted by them: "Surrendering to the sound, Macon Dead moved closer. He wanted no conversation, no witness, only to listen and perhaps to see the three of them, the source of that music that made him think of fields and wild turkey and calico" (Morrison 1977, 29). In some way, this sign of nostalgia proves that not every aspect related to their ancestral culture has been removed. This division within the same community will have consequences on Milkman's identity, mostly

because of his father's denial of their ancestors. Thus, he will be confused about his position in life until the end of the novel, in which Milkman will discover the true sense of identity.

As it has been just mentioned, Milkman appears to be confused about his function in life, and particularly, once he learns that people cannot fly, he loses all interest in everything (Morrison 1977, 9). This fact is particularly linked to the idea of flight mentioned before in the case of Mr Smith. The very same day Mr Smith committed suicide from the roof of Mercy Hospital, Milkman was born there. What is more, both characters lost all interest in life once they realised that people could not fly; knowledge that caused Mr Smith's suicide and Milkman's confusion. This connection is relevant when studying Milkman's evolution, since his self-alienation from the community would have been caused due to his identity chaos. Thus, from the beginning, readers are presented with an ambiguous protagonist who is seen as a spoilt boy coming from a rich family living an easy life, with a quite peculiar name "Milkman", due to his prolonged breast-feeding, and a challenging surname such as "Dead". Furthermore, the fact that he is described as having one leg shorter than the other verifies his instability. Some experts, like Dorothy H. Lee in her article "*Song of Solomon: To Ride the Air*", regards this aspect as a sign as he were about to fly away (1982, 66). As mentioned before, naming has proved to be an important practise in African culture, but the fact that Dead's family has never paid attention to it points to the idea that they are leaving behind their traditions again, which causes difficulties in their community. The head of the family has never been worried about naming: "Macon Dead never knew how it came about – how his only son acquired the nickname [...]. It was a matter that concerned him a good deal, for the giving of names in his family was always surrounded by what he believed to be monumental foolishness" (Morrison 1977, 5). Therefore, the denial towards naming is another motive for Milkman's identity dilemma.

The sense of displacement also derives from Milkman's lack of responsibility in life. He has never been given any duty to perform or any chance of reliability by his family. Milkman has always behaved his own way without following any rule; consequently, lack of obligations and ambitions makes him feel hollow and totally passive. The first relevant responsibility given to him is the search for gold requested by his father, and although being a materialistic and selfish intention, Milkman will feel motivated by performing such a

demanding task. Another significant factor that contributes to Milkman's emptiness is the conventional relationship with Hagar. Even though Milkman confirms to have fallen in love with her at certain point, after twelve years he admits that Hagar is becoming redundant in his life: "Now, after more than a dozen years, he was getting tired of her. [...] There was no excitement, no galloping of blood in his neck or his heart at the thought of her" (Morrison 1977, 91). Falling into the same pattern, the absence of obligations and the in-betweenness that he suffers due to the division within the same community are crucial when referring to Milkman's gradual change.

Concerning the diversity in the process of construction of identity present in the novel, three different approaches will be suggested. Together with the westernised view of identity given by Macon Dead comes Guitar's point of view. Milkman's best friend offers a "radical separatism" approach (Wilentz 1992, 65) represented by the "Seven Days" (Morrison 1977, 155). The former is based on a complete assimilation of the mainstream culture, and the latter relies on an undivided attention to the black community within western context, and in some cases, with the use of violence towards the white community: " [...] when a Negro child, Negro woman, or Negro man is killed by whites and nothing is done about it by their law and their courts, this society selects a similar victim at random, and they execute him or her in a similar manner if they can" (Morrison 1977, 154). From these two completely opposite approaches, Pilate, the representative of the ideal African woman, will offer a third alternative. Milkman's aunt will be the provider of an alternative based on a double self, which draws upon "the acceptance of one's African values and cultural heritage" (Wilentz 1992, 65).

As it has been previously introduced in the beginning, Pilate represents the traditional, the pure sense of Africa, since she brings all the African practises together that help to preserve the ancestral culture. Departing from an afro-centric view, Pilate is first defined as the "singing woman" (Morrison 1977, 9) in Mr Smith's suicide scene. Later, readers will discover that this woman is in fact Milkman's aunt. She is regarded as the transmitter and keeper of African values and heritage due to the fact that she is always surrounded by specific details that reminds of the old Africa, such as the singing, the music, and the telling of stories. Her family is depicted as: "The image of the three generations of women living in harmony,

plaiting hair and singing songs, revisions an ideal African village compound [...]” (Wilentz 1992, 67). Oppositely to Dead's family, Pilate's environment will have a rewarding effect on Milkman from his birth, and one of the main reasons is that Pilate acts as his “saver” (Wilentz 1992, 64), helping Ruth to fight against Macon's unwillingness to have a baby, Milkman. Not only does Pilate save Ruth's baby, but also helps her to combat her loneliness caused by Macon. Apart from conceiving Pilate as a saver, she is also seen as a supernatural character, considering magic elements associated with her. For example, the fact that she has no navel is a proof of this supernatural power (Noriega 2002, 44). Pilate's lack of navel is one the most impressive supernatural aspects included in the novel, and it is emphasized by the many characters in the novel. This gives Pilate a kind of power, and she is placed in a privileged position. Even Milkman regards it as supernatural, as he expresses: “Pilate did not have a navel. Since that was true, anything could be [...]” (Morrison 1977, 294). Therefore, magic realism, constantly present in this story, tries to combine these supernatural features that transgress the borders of reality with the everyday reality of these characters (Noriega 2002, 44).

Pilate's privileged position is also related to her role as a woman storyteller. In general, women boast some sort of privilege in the novel because they are regarded as the educators, the transmitters of culture to the future generations. Women in the novel, and specially Pilate, contribute in some way to Milkman's quest of identity. This idea is linked to the presence of the myth of the “Flying African”, considering that stories of slavery were captured by women, since they were left behind by men, the ones who flew away. In the novel's dedication, the author writes: “The fathers may soar / And the children may know their names” (Morrison ii, 1977). Hence, when fathers were gone, mothers were in charge of educating and telling the children their names in order not to lose their past. Thus, women were the only witnesses to pass on the names, traditions, and heritage that were being lost (Wilentz 1989-1990, 30). By the singing of Solomon song, Pilate commemorates the flight of the African slave that will, in the end, uncover Milkman's ancestry. Consequently, Pilate is perceived as a spiritual guide for Milkman, since she accompanies him throughout his evolution; from his passivity towards his rebirth. Pilate always welcomes Milkman to her house and tells him stories, and this originates positive feelings in Milkman, yet he admits in one occasion in Pilate's house: “the

first time in his life that he remembered being completely happy” (Morrison 1977, 47).

After having analysed these two characters, Milkman's isolation from the community and Pilate's contribution to his character, it is important to study the evolution the protagonist will undergo in the second part of the novel. The second half will portray Milkman's journey to the south of the country: “The world slaves made” (Wilentz 1992, 70) and his encounter with the myth. The shift from present to past takes place in terms of locations, seeing that the novel will change its setting, from north to south. Before departing, there is a precise time in the novel in which Milkman is demanded to steal the gold that seems to be in Pilate's possession. What seems an insignificant event at the beginning will become a crucial decision for Milkman; since after Macon Dead's request for gold, Milkman will start his spiritual and physical trip to his roots. Therefore, what started as a material journey towards a material gain will finally result in a spiritual triumph for the protagonist. The journey to the south, Virginia, reaffirms the African Diaspora, since it will lead Milkman to the understanding of his family and ancestral culture (Wilentz 1992, 71). As Marc C. Conner claims: “The progress of *Song of Solomon* consists in Milkman's gradual education in his past, his lineage, and his ties to his communal traditions: through learning where he comes from, Milkman arrives at an understanding of who he is” (Conner 2000, 57). As a consequence, while encountering with his past, Milkman's search leads him to the discovery of the “Flying African” legend which has been overlooked by his family for generations.

At this point, it is relevant to consider the task of storytelling, bearing in mind that there will be stories within the main story essential to Milkman's search. In Virginia, Milkman will be acquainted with some characters that know the story of his family. One of the narrators is Reverend Cooper, who appears surprised for Milkman's visit: “I know your people!” (Morrison 1977, 229). By hearing some of his anecdotes, Milkman understands that he has never given the proper attention to his past, as he states: “It was a good feeling to come into a strange town and find a stranger who knew your people. All his life he'd heard the tremor in the word. . . . But he hadn't known what it meant: links” (Morrison 1977, 229). These connections which Milkman had not been aware of until this moment appear to make sense in his life, as well as the recovery of ancestors' names. Reverend Cooper will provide Milkman with different names of his family, so that he will approach his precedents. One of these

names are Circe and Susan Byrd, the former like Pilate, appears in the story as a teller and representative of ancestral culture and oral tradition. When Milkman first sees her, he “debates between dream and reality” (Noriega 2002, 48); so both Pilate and Circe are surrounded by magic. Circe and Byrd tell him about his grandmother Sing and the first Macon of the Dead family, called Jake, and how they came to Virginia. Moreover, Circe also provides him with the instructions to find the cave where the gold is presumably hidden. These two narrators provide Milkman with important information about his family, but always with this touch of magic characteristic of Toni Morrison. The purpose of including these characters and their stories is to create awareness of links within the black community, which Milkman will later discover thanks to the song and the myth of the “Flying African”. But now, what is being suggested is that Milkman is about to discover the “discredited knowledge”, term used by many experts, for example Noriega, who defines it as the knowledge, legends, and myths that have been eradicated due to colonization by the prevailing culture (Noriega 2002, 37). Thus, Morrison's use of these stories within the main story is done intentionally to give a chance to the voice of the colonised.

After these stories, the novel continues with Milkman travelling more to the south, to Shalimar (Virginia). Once there, he observes the idyllic scenery: “He wondered why black people ever left the South. Where he went, there wasn't a white face around, and the Negroes were as pleasant, wide-spirited, and self-contained as could be. He earned the rewards he got here” (Morrison 1977, 260). This idealisation of the southern landscape contrasts with the conventional way of life in the north. Curiously enough, just after his arrival Milkman meets Mr Solomon, owner of a local store called “Solomon's General Store, which turned out to be the heart and soul of Shalimar, Virginia” (Morrison, 260). This will be Milkman's first contact with the name “Solomon”, which will later have great significance in the novel. Right after, he stops to observe one group of children who are playing and singing what Milkman defines as a “meaningless rhyme”: “*Jay the only son of Solomon [...]*” (Morrison, 264). This song is non-sense for Milkman now; but then, with the aid of names he will be able to discover the real meaning behind it.

Afterwards, Milkman realises that the material goal he was supposed to accomplish is not possible because there is no gold so far; however, he will comprehend other relevant

issues concerning his roots and this new location. Milkman will also have to learn how to adapt himself in the rural life, which results to be a demanding task, and contrasts with the urban life in the north. The rural is related to his past and to Africa, so he will be forced to assimilate some customs that will later help him to understand his new condition. Therefore, by meeting with all his relatives and being told ancestral stories about his family, Milkman will be able to acknowledge his heritage. As soon as he listens to the song the second time, sung by the children in Shalimar, Milkman will start to put pieces together. All the names he has learnt during his trip to the south will now have a meaning for him. The whole Solomon song appears on page 303 of the novel:

Jake the only son of Solomon

[...]

Solomon and Ryna Belali Shalut

[...]

Twenty-one children, the last one Jake!

Oh Solomon don't leave me here

Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone

Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home

(Morrison 1977)

The “Flying African” myth, represented through the Solomon song, makes reference to the flight Solomon performed in order to abandon slavery and fly towards “home”. Milkman now understands the connections between the names; Solomon left Ryna behind, who went insane due to her loneliness; however, she stayed to sing and tell the stories to the children. Jake, Macon's Dead dad, was the son of Solomon, and in fact, Milkman is Solomon's great grandson. When Milkman uncovers the story of Solomon, he feels identified with something for the first time in his life: “He was eager and happy as he had ever been in his life” (Morrison 1977, 304). Thus, family cultural knowledge has moved him from total indifference towards completely awareness, as it is appreciated in this quote from “*Song of Solomon: To Ride the Air*”: “In order to go forward, he realizes, one must go back – examine the past rather than ignore it. Initiated into a real black community, he abandons false pride

and atones for his errors in suffering. Releasing egotism, he attains rebirth into new life” (Lee 1982, 70). In brief, the final acceptance of his past has provided him with the identity he was looking for. Therefore, it is suggested that Milkman was not satisfied with the fixed notion of identity that he was given, as a subject belonging to a specific community with. Instead, he challenges it by travelling back to his roots and realising about his real past. Thus, he creates a new concept of identity which embraces his ancestral culture taking into account his African American origins.

Nevertheless, Milkman will also become aware of the social irresponsibility of the men who flew away, especially Solomon, who took flight towards freedom leaving his woman alone. Noriega argues in her article:

There is an inherent contradiction in Solomon's flight. He is Milkman's hero and model, but at the same time he was irresponsible: he left behind his wife and children and did not show solidarity with his community. [...] Milkman advances one step further by making the connection between his desertion of Hagar and Solomon's desertion of Ryna. Milkman finally accepts his responsibility for Hagar's death, confesses his so-far neglect of his mother and Pilate [...] and asserts his place within the community. (Noriega 2000, 58)

Thus, Milkman becomes conscious about the suffering the women might have suffered in the past, as well as Hagar's pain due to his abandonment and misbehaviour towards her. Hence, after realising about these difficulties, Milkman will feel compassion and will understand better women's undermined position. This awareness will also enrich Milkman's identity and his desire of flying will increase. Accordingly, Milkman will have undergone a transformation of culture towards accepting one's African heritage and values taking into account all the members of his community. For this reason, Milkman will become the repository of tradition, culture, and ancestry; position given by Pilate, his spiritual guide and “pilot” (Bryant 1999, 106) through his journey. Thanks to these stories, names, and connections, Milkman develops into a loyal follower of African culture: “The slave must possess the secret African words [...], acts which emphasize the flyer's own heroism and spiritual investment in Africa as home” (Walters 1997, 13). This is precisely what Solomon did and, what Milkman will have to perform. So, until Milkman becomes able to embrace his

African ancestry and heritage he won't be able to fly. Once he understands the magic words behind the song, the rhymes he once defined as *meaningless* and put all the pieces together, he will be capable of flying.

Milkman's flight will finally take place in Guitar's hands, his brother and enemy at the same time (Lee 1982, 66). Guitar's character has also guide his friend throughout his journey, since he has helped Milkman realise about his weaknesses and defects. Guitar defies Milkman's westernised way of life from the beginning, in opposition to his own as a member of the separatist group the "Seven Days". Therefore, this confrontation will reach its limit at the very end of the novel: "As fleet and bright as a lodestar he wheeled toward Guitar and it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother. For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrender to the air, you could *ride* it" (Morrison 1977, 337). Many experts coincide when discussing the end of the novel, because it remains unknown if they die or not; even Morrison emphasizes "it did not matter which one of them". For this reason, the novel itself stresses that it is not the ending what matters, but the process of liberation undertaken by both characters. Milkman will finally conclude his self-discovery travel by flying toward his friend, reaching thus, the final uncovering of his self.

At the end, readers may perceive a circular structure of the novel regarding the presence of the myth. The novel starts with Mr Smith suicide, which is the first reference to flight; then, it continues with the Solomon song explaining Solomon's flight to home, and finally the novel ends up with Milkman's flight towards Guitar. Thus, apart from working as a piece characterizing Milkman's evolution from passivity to activity, the myth also works as structure of the novel, providing a sense of unity to the whole story (Harris 1980).

After having studied all the significant aspects related to the evolution that the protagonist suffers in relation to the presence of the myth in the novel, it can be inferred that the use of the myth in *Song of Solomon* has a clear intention: "In the manner of an African woman storyteller, Morrison tells the tale of the Flying Africans to keep her traditions and culture alive on paper" (Wilentz 1992, 63). Thus, the "Flying African" is considered a piece of folklore which is still alive, and it works to define the African community in America, and specially the protagonist, who felt alienated from his community due to his ignorance towards his past. As a result, the myth serves as identification for Milkman, which proves to be the

perfect path for him to achieve an identity in which he feels part of the African American community.

4. Conclusion

The African American Negro has been depicted in multiple ways in contemporary American literatures, however, what Toni Morrison creates in her novel *Song of Solomon* (1977) is to provide her readers with a new dilemma. Not only does it exist conflicts between the white and Negro communities, but there are also existing confrontations between the members of the same African American community due to their past. As a result of slavery upheavals, the African American citizens in America have always felt a kind of displacement. Principally, they have been forced to assimilate the mainstream culture and leave behind their ancestral traditions. Notwithstanding, there have been a part of the community who have opted for extremist separatism, by creating a barrier between the whites and the Negroes, and another part who have denied their African past by assimilating the westernised way of life. Thus, Morrison's aim is to offer an alternative vision to the black community that will facilitate their process of identification through the myth of the “Flying African.”

Through the character of Milkman, Morrison represents the dislocated subject with neither objectives nor motivations in life due to his ambiguous identity caused by divisions in the community. The in-betweenness he feels will try to be solved by Pilate, his guide throughout the novel. She will be the representative of the African ancestral culture, the teller of stories, and Milkman's “saver”. During his trip to the south of the country, Milkman will learn the story of his ancestors and the myth of the “Flying African”, which results to be the key to his self-discovery. By meeting his relatives and listening to their stories, Milkman becomes aware of his real past, which he was denied to know because of his father's rejection of his origins. By knowing the names of his family he realises that: “Names that had meaning [...]. When you know your name, you should hang on to it, for unless it is noted down and remembered, it will die when you do” (Morrison 1977, 329). Now does Milkman understand that one must preserve their name in order to be present in their community; for this reason, cultural aspects related to the African community have been essential when studying the process of construction of identity. Naming, the telling of stories by his relatives in the south,

the presence of ancestors, altogether with elements of Magic Realism, have developed the way to approach the “Flying African” myth. As Wilentz remarks in his article: “The concept of knowing one's name, tribe, and cultural heritage is paramount to the novel, but Morrison takes it one step further. She shows the necessity of stripping off the layers of hegemonic discourse both the names and values of “that civilization which exists underneath” (Wilentz 1992, 73). Thus, knowledge, legends and stories which were hidden due to colonisation must be uncovered, and the person in charge of doing it will be Milkman.

The transition from passivity to consciousness undertaken by Milkman is evident when he attains his real African past, and consequently he will become a more self-assured character in regard to his actions and behaviour. After learning that he is Solomon's grandson, Milkman will finally understand his role as African American descendant. Taking into consideration all his family, and especially women, Pilate, Hagar and Ruth, Milkman will become the repository of African ancestral culture in order to fly away, as Solomon did; only this way he will be able to “ride the air” (Lee 1982, 70). By flying to the arms of his friend Guitar, Milkman will definitely satisfy his new notion of identity which has been attained by embracing his own roots and by learning the myth of the “Flying African”. Besides, the ending of the novel appears to be uncertain, as it is not clear if the protagonist dies or not; nevertheless, Morrison highlights that the importance relies on the process Milkman endeavours rather than on the meaning of the final act (Morrison 1977, 337). Thus, the process, mainly referred as the process of construction of identity, accompanied by the “Flying African” myth is ultimately achieved by the protagonist who has sought his origins by travelling from present to past and from north to south, and which has finally lead him to his rebirth.

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