

Interpretation of Postmodern Ethics in *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison

Xuemeng Xu *

School of Humanities and Law, North China University of Technology, Beijing 100144, China

* Corresponding author Email: xuxuemeng_1122@qq.com

Abstract: Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, the protagonist Milkman, a middle-class black man, embarks on a coming-of-age journey to search for his southern roots. Having grown up under a patriarchal and materialistic environment, he witnesses the silencing of women in his family, experiences anxious competition for wealth and status within the middle class, and faces the persistent marginalization of his racial identity in a white-dominated society. This leads him to face multiple dilemmas concerning identity, desire, and relationships. Meanwhile, his quest to discover the ancestral roots in the South prompts him to reconsider ethnic history, social hierarchies and gender dynamics, sparking introspection and prompting him to reconstruct his sense of self and ethics. This paper adopts a postmodern ethical viewpoint that centers on the interconnected dimensions of race, class, and gender to dismantle the opposing binaries between white and black communities, dominant and underprivileged groups, and men and women in *Song of Solomon*. It explores how individuals can develop a moral conscience and sense of ethical responsibility in the face of differences, rebuilding ethical relationships through caring for the "other". Furthermore, transcending the traditional oppression-resistance paradigm, the study emphasizes the ethical philosophy of "embracing coexistence amidst differences," offering a new theoretical perspective through which to understand ethical dilemmas in complex reality.

Keywords: *Song of Solomon*; Toni Morrison; Postmodern Ethics; Binary Opposition; African America.

1. Introduction

Toni Morrison (1931-2019) was the first African American woman writer to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. Her works are renowned for their keen observations of African American life and poetic expressions, profoundly focusing on issues of race, culture, and gender. Her masterpiece, *Song of Solomon*, through the journey of the black youth Milkman to the South in search of his roots, uncovers the shackles of racial discrimination, class antagonism, and gender oppression on the fate of black people.

Research on Toni Morrison in China started relatively late, and it was only after she won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993 that related academic discussions truly gained momentum and rapidly developed. Currently, studies on *Song of Solomon* primarily concentrate on three major aspects: feminism, the bildungsroman, and African American culture. Early research often focused on the combination of feminism and trauma theory, exemplified by Wang Lili's [1] *Emerging from the Shadows of Trauma: A Study of Trauma in the Novels of Toni Morrison's Black Female Characters*. In recent years, with the rise of ecofeminist criticism, many scholars have begun to explore the connection between the fate of black women and the fate of nature. For instance, in her *An Ecofeminist Interpretation of Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon*, Liu Jinyan[2] deconstructed the binary opposition between humans and nature within the framework of patriarchal concepts, pointing out that men can only gain wisdom and energy from nature by seeing themselves as part of it, as women do. Scholars studying the bildungsroman approach delve into the root-seeking journey of growth of the black male protagonist Milkman in the novel. For example, in the *On Toni Morrison's Bildungsroman Song of Solomon*, Zhang Cuijuan[3] focused on the confusion and pain Milkman experiences during his growth process, as well as his transformation and growth after enduring hardships.

Research on African American culture primarily expresses concern and exploration of the current situation of African Americans. For instance, in the *Exploring the Changes in African American Culture through Song of Solomon*, Cao Wei [4] emphasized the importance and urgency of inheriting and disseminating African American cultural traditions. In conclusion, it is not difficult to find that domestic scholars' research covers multiple dimensions. Even though the existing research achievements are abundant, they seldom touch upon the interpretation of ethical relationships in the text.

This paper reinterprets Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* from a postmodern ethical perspective, employing Zygmunt Bauman's ethical framework and his core concept of "being for the other". In his book *Postmodern Ethics*, Bauman states that "the other is not a force but a face"[5]. This implies that the Other is a concrete, flesh-and-blood individual. Through face-to-face encounters and interactions, the self is compelled to respond to the needs of others and reflect on its own actions, thereby generating genuine moral responsibility. The story of Milkman serves as a literary representation of this ethical proposition: he struggles against the triple oppositions of race, class and gender, and ultimately awakens a sense of community and responsibility through encounters and reconciliation with others, achieving self-redemption.

2. Racial Identity: Reconstructing Self-Perception

Although slavery had long been abolished in 20th-century America, tensions between the black and white races remained acute, with blacks enduring severe racial discrimination in various aspects of life. At that time, strict racial segregation confined blacks to crowded, dilapidated ghettos, also known as "Blood Bank," [6], because "black blood flowed so freely." from there. This stood in stark

contrast to the affluent villa districts inhabited by whites. The safety and basic rights of black lives were also neglected and unprotected in society. Freddie once mentioned to Milkman that in Florida, black orphans, due to the lack of specialized orphanages, were forced to grow up in prisons. Meanwhile, in the North, a young black man named Till was brutally murdered by whites merely for whistling and flirting with a white woman, and was falsely accused of being dangerous due to wielding a knife after his death. This institutional oppression not only physically harmed blacks but also internalized racial discrimination as a spiritual burden for the black community. This leading to confusion in identity recognition and gave rise to extreme racism.

As a radical black group, "the Seven Days" believed in maintaining a so-called "balance" between the number of black and white people through violent means. They randomly selected white targets for retaliation, regardless of their age, gender or innocence. Milkman's best friend, Guitar, who was also a member of the group, firmly believed that whites were inherently "inhuman" and "cruel", traits which he claimed existed in their chromosomes and made all whites potential killers of blacks. However, he justified his actions as stemming from love for the black community rather than hatred for whites, saying: "What I'm doing ain't about hating white people. It's about loving us. About loving you. My whole life is love." [6] Ironically, when Guitar became completely engrossed in the logic of interpreting love through killing, he murdered Pilate and pointed his gun at his friend Milkman. This extreme behaviour reflected Guitar's oversimplified perception of his own identity, portraying himself as a victim and projecting the racial discrimination he had experienced onto others, perpetuating racial discrimination and plunging racial opposition into a vicious cycle. Guitar's example not only reveals the profound psychological impact of extreme racism and also criticizes the cycle of violence that begets more violence, which exacerbates the rift and hatred between races.

Another character in the book, Circe, embodies a different kind of resistance—non-violent, silent, yet enduring. Having once been a maid for the white Butler family, who seized the farm and murdered Milkman's grandfather Macon Dead I, Circe chooses to remain in the dilapidated mansion long after the family's decline and the death of all its members. Milkman is puzzled by this, questioning her loyalty and love for her white employers. However, Circe's response reveals a deeper intention. She tells Milkman that she stays to witness the complete collapse and decay of the mansion, which symbolizes the violence of slavery, "I want to see it all go, make sure it does go, and that nobody fixes it up." [6]. By choosing to exist as a counter to forgetting, Circe turns the ruins into an eternal indictment when the bloody history that will fade into the past.

The confrontation between white and black people not only puts a strain on relations between the two groups but also indirectly intensifies conflicts within the black community. Milkman, a dressed smartly and speaking haughtily northern black youth from a wealthy middle-class family, arrives in the southern town of Shalimar. He shows indifference to the names of the local poor blacks, viewing them merely as cheap labour. He even uses discriminatory terms like "savage," "traitorous," and "evil" [6] to describe his own people, which were employed by white colonists. This attitude almost puts him in grave danger. Southern blacks label Milkman as someone "whose skin was as black as theirs, but they knew

he had the heart of white men." [6] This label of "black skin, white heart" reflects Milkman's identity confusion at the intersection of multiple cultures. He cannot integrate into white mainstream society, nor is he accepted by his black compatriots.

For Milkman, the process of rebuilding his identity begins with the exploration and reconciliation of his own surname. As American scholar Edward Countryman once pointed out that "Slaves were stripped of their surnames, along with their sense of family identity." [7] Initially, Milkman felt intense dissatisfaction, bordering on hatred, towards his surname "Dead," which was given to his grandfather by a white officer after a drinking binge and then passed down through the generations. Milkman repeatedly told Guitar that he felt bound by this surname, as if he were already dead. However, upon arriving in his hometown of Shalimar, he discovered a deep emotional connection to the land and its people. This sense of belonging enabled him to regain his self-identity when confronted with a race stripped of its true names and the ethical ruptures caused by colonization.

Milkman gradually realized that the names of the black community were not mere cold letters on paper, but historical witnesses. Names such as "Muddy Waters" and "Bo Diddle" [6], which were directly borrowed from legendary blues musicians, embody the adherence to and transmission of their cultural roots among African-Americans, helping to construct a unique cultural identity within a white-dominated American society. Conversely, names like "Dead," "Nat Nigger," and "First Corinthians" [6] bear the traumatic memories of slavery. These imposed or distorted names are not only manifestations of suffering but also expressions of resistance against oppression and aspirations for freedom. Milkman recognized that these names were not just individual identifiers but important witnesses to the vicissitudes and cultural transmission of the black community. Through his continuous journey of exploration, Milkman ultimately discovered his family's true surname—Solomon, in a sung nursery rhyme. It originated from the legend of his great-grandfather's flight back to the African homeland to escape slavery. As American scholar Valerie Smith wrote in her book, "A viable sense of African American identity comes from responding to alternative constructions of self and community other than those received from mainstream American culture." [8]. This suggests that, rather than forcibly integrating into the mainstream culture of other nations, the key to achieving identity for the African American community lies in maintaining their unique properties within diversity, thereby obtaining a sense of ethnic community.

In terms of racial identity, Guitar's understanding of himself and the black community is overly simplistic. He reduces racial oppression to a violent cycle of "whites sucking blood while blacks shed it." Circe's silent protest, on the other hand, is static, as she imprisons herself in the past and becomes a guardian of memories. Milkman's journey of seeking roots, however, deconstructs these two extremes. He no longer accepts himself as merely the "other" in white society or as bound by the name "Dead." Instead, by active exploring the roots of black culture, he creates an identity that belongs to his own people. Stuart Hall once mentioned that "cultural identity is not an fixed essence..." [9] suggesting that black identity should not exist solely under the gaze of whites but rather as a dynamic process constantly generated through the nation's historical memory, geographical migration, and cultural hybridization.

2.1. Gender Dialogue: Understanding Women's Predicament

Simone de Beauvoir, a pioneering feminist, posited that "Man is the Subject, the Absolute; women is the other." [10] In *Song of Solomon*, black women experience dual oppression based on race and gender. They must endure racial discrimination from white society while also fulfilling functional roles within the patriarchal system. Within families, women are often treated as accessories to men, losing their sense of self as individuals. Guitar compares Ruth, Milkman's mother, to a harmless "doe," while Milkman views his lover Hagar as his "private honey pot." Even those from wealthy middle-class families refer to the women they know as "doll babies." Even when women attend college, they often use their academic qualifications and educational background as dowries. They lack practical life skills and knowledge, and are unable to survive independently of men. Under the oppression of patriarchy, black women seem destined to accept selfless dedication and silence, fulfilling the roles of enlightened wives and loving mothers.

Nevertheless, Morrison portrays women not as one-dimensional victims but as exhibiting extraordinary wisdom and resilience who seek self-actualization in their own ways. Pilate embodies this power, with her life philosophy forming a stark contrast to Guitar's distorted, black-and-white view of love. She holds a love that transcends race and gender. Pilate extends kindness to everyone around her, proactively caring for her sister-in-law, Ruth, helping her to conceive and giving birth smoothly when she was tortured by Macon's cold violence, thereby bringing Milkman into the world. Despite Macon's estrangement from her, she never holds a grudge against the children, instead teaching Milkman to sing and telling him family legends like a mother. Pilate holds a deep reverence for all life. During their escape after her father was killed by whites, Macon killed an elderly white man in a cave out of fear. Years later, Pilate returns to the cave to collect the bones, believing that life is precious. "If you take a life, then you own it. You are responsible for it...Life is life. Precious." [6] Even when shot by Guitar at the end, her final words are devoid of complaints and filled with boundless love and forgiveness. "I wish I'd knowed more people. I would of loved 'em all. If I'd knowed more, I would a loved more." [6].

While Pilate's love is like a broad, benevolent river, Milkman's sister Lena is a sharp blade that pierces the concept of male supremacy. She points out that Milkman has spent his entire life "laughing, using, ordering and judging" [6] all the women in the family, whose lives revolve around him. Ruth's despair, Corinthians' loneliness and Lena's lack of self-esteem are all ignored by Milkman's egotism. Lena notes that when Milkman physically assaulted his father as a child, he did so not purely out of compassion for his mother, who was experiencing domestic violence, nor to speak up for her, but rather out of a desire to take over, or even replace, the male power belonging to his father. Lena no longer tolerates gender inequality, but instead rises up in rebellion, expressing her dissatisfaction with the most powerful words and accusations. She points directly at Milkman's selfishness and male privilege, demonstrating the awakening of women's consciousness in defending their self-worth.

in *Song of Solomon*, Morrison also emphasizes the importance of listening and communication especially the need for men to respond proactively to the voices of women

that are ignored under patriarchal oppression. As a teenager, Milkman was misled by his father. After Macon told Milkman that Ruth had an overly intimate relationship with her father, Milkman began to suspect his mother and developed hatred towards her along with his father. The turning point began with Milkman's proactive observation. He secretly followed his mother and discovered her visiting her father's grave alone. This led to an in-depth conversation between mother and son, during which Ruth poured out her grievances about her contradictions with Macon, revealed the deceptive errors and lies in Macon's words, and confessed her love for Milkman. During Milkman's growth, the shackles of patriarchal beliefs were also reflected in his aunt Pilate. Due to a misunderstanding that Pilate had taken the gold for herself, Macon forbade Milkman from associating with her and called her a poisonous snake. Ironically, Macon himself was attracted to the singing of Pilate's family, but only eavesdropped on it from outside the window, maintaining the posture of a voyeur. This contradictory behavior reflects men's desire for the emotional comfort provided by women, while consistently refusing to engage in equal dialogue. Brief moments of resonance cannot penetrate the high walls of prejudice, and the breakdown of communication ultimately becomes a deadlock in family conflicts. Milkman's moral awakening is reflected in his proactive crossing of the boundaries set by his father, freeing himself from his father's bias and prejudice. After he and Guitar stole Pilate's package (which they thought contained gold, but was actually the remains of Macon I) and were arrested, Macon still clung to his old accusations, believing Pilate to be a complete liar. At this point, Milkman angrily rebutted, telling his father, "All these years you've been holding that against her." [6] It was from this moment of defending Pilate that Milkman began to care about the situation of women. In search of the truth, Milkman travelled south, following the path of Pilate's footsteps after the age of twelve. He passed through Danville, Petersburg, and before finally arriving at Shalimar, a southern town bearing family memories. Milkman's understanding of his mother's secrets, coupled with his pursuit of Pilate's footsteps, ultimately revealed the family truth, which had been obscured by patriarchal narratives. When he returned to the north and eagerly shared what he had seen and learned with Pilate, he had transformed from a passive observer into an active listener and communicator.

In the postmodern ethical thought of the renowned philosopher Zygmunt Bauman, "being for the other" serves as the backbone for awakening the moral self. It is a pivotal force that guides individuals away from narrow egoism and self-serving towards caring for and respecting others. When Milkman repeatedly hears the ancient blues song "O Solomon don't leave me here" sung by Pilate and the children of Shalimar, he no longer avoids responsibility, severs ties with his past, or evades commitments and emotions towards others. He begins to deeply reflect on his actions and acknowledges his mistakes. He starts to comprehend the hardships his mother has faced, recognizes the harm inflicted upon her by his father's neglect, violence, and sexual exploitation, and empathizes with how he would feel if he were in her position. He attempts to understand Hagar's pain and despair, and feels deep guilt for his hurtful words. As Pilate tells Milkman, "You just can't fly off and leave a body behind." [6] In the pursuit of freedom, no one can escape their connections with others. The self is no longer an isolated entity, but exists within relationships and has responsibilities towards others. This

responsibility is a voluntary choice, constituting “an absolute, entirely non-heteronomous responsibility.” [5].

2.2. Class Breakthrough: Abandoning Materialist Pursuits

In literary narratives, class manifests not only as a social structure but also leaves a profound imprint on ethical relationships and moral judgments. It shapes complex choices that characters made between good and evil, justice and responsibility.

As a black landlord who amassed wealth through property rentals, Macon's class ascent was built upon the exploitation of his fellow blacks, which is indistinguishable from the behavior of white plantation owners. He ruthlessly evicted Mrs. Bains and her young children for failing to pay rent; and showed no concern for human life when confronted with Porter's drunken attempt to jump off a building, caring only about his rent. Macon viewed material possessions as the fundamental law of survival, regarded others as tools to be exploited, and equated money with personal freedom. He constantly instilled the idea that money and material possessions were the be-all and end-all in Milkman, saying, “The only 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.” [6] “You'll be free. Money is freedom...The only real freedom there is.” [6] Influenced by this, Milkman naturally emulated his father's behaviour, losing interest in his family's past and the regenerative traits of all others.

This distorted value system was passed down through two generations of the family. When young Macon killed an elder white man in a cave and discovered gold, he felt that “Life, safety, and luxury fanned out before him like the tale spread of a peacock.” [6] But it was this bag of gold that caused him to fall out with his sister Pilate, ultimately making him a prisoner of material desires. Years later, when Guitar and Milkman conspired to steal Pilate's bag of gold, they stumbled upon a white peacock with a cumbersome tail. Guitar believed that the peacock could not fly freely because “Too much tail. All that jewelry weighs it down. Like vanity...Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down.” [6] Tragically, these former best friends failed to realize that the gold they were chasing was the “peacock's tail” that crushed their souls. Unlike Christian symbolism of the peacock representing “resurrection and immortality” and “rebirth and new life,” Morrison's peacock reflects the Macon family's morbid pursuit of wealth accumulation, social prestige, and status, which ultimately consumed them and caused them to lose their true selves.

Milkman's journey to the South marks a turning point in the disintegration of class and materialism. The caves in the wilderness offer him new insights. As he crosses rivers, bushes, and forests on foot for the first time, this wealthy young man, who has been used to travelling by car since childhood, is forced to remove his shoes, socks, suit, and tie – the external symbols of his status. Touching the earth with his bare feet again suggests that Milkman is gradually shedding the shackles of materialism and returning to an authentic state. He had originally believed that gold would grant him the ultimate power to do whatever he pleased, escape his hometown and the people around him, and enjoy absolute freedom. However, there is no gold in the caves, only “rocks, boards, leaves...”, which might be nature's way of mocking the absurdity of materialistic pursuits. What further

shocks Milkman and completely reverses his thinking is his experience of primitive hunting with the local blacks in Shalimar. Immersed in the darkness and silence of the primitive forest, he suddenly realizes that money, watches, shoes, cars, and his father's reputation – all the things that once defined his class identity – are useless and even become a burden. Because in Shalimar, everything is only about the essential qualities that humans are born with: “eyes, ears, nose, taste, and touch,” and “an ability to separate out...the one that life itself may depend on.” [6] This ability is precisely what Milkman lacks due to his materialistic upbringing. Seeing how the people in his hometown communicate with hounds, whisper with trees and the earth, and form a close connection with nature and other living beings fills Milkman with tremendous spiritual awe. These survival philosophies, rooted in the authenticity of life, represent a pure, original wisdom uncontaminated by modern material civilization. Milkman finally realizes that the “upper-class black” identity his father constructed with real estate and suits is nothing more than a shackle that oppresses his fellow blacks. The belief that “possession is freedom,” like the non-existent gold, is a lie that imprisons the soul. When “possession” becomes “belonging,” life is no longer reduced to exploitable resources but exists in symbiosis with the body, land and memory.

This awakening is reflected in Milkman's changed attitude towards disadvantaged groups. In Shalimar, for example, after receiving care from Sweet, a black woman, Milkman took the initiative to bathe and massage her, make her bed, and prepare cold drinks. At the freight station in Danville, when an elderly white man asked to help him lift a huge cardboard box onto the platform, Milkman readily lent a hand. However, this action provoked skepticism from Guitar, who “had never seen Milkman lend a hand to anyone, especially a stranger” [6] In Guitar's eyes, Milkman had always been selfish and lacked empathy. Even Milkman himself found it hard to believe his own spontaneous kindness, feeling as if he were telling a clumsy lie despite being truthful. This display of goodwill and the shift in thought reflects Milkman's abandonment of his sense of superiority as an upper-class individual, and his instinctive desire to care for vulnerable groups, transcending racial and class biases.

As Zygmunt Bauman states, “The eternal puzzle of choosing between good and evil (that is, ‘taking responsibility for oneself’) is precisely the meaning (the only meaning) of morality's existence.” [11] In other words, individuals must make their own moral choices and judgments when faced with dilemmas. This idea is illustrated by the different ethical choices made by Milkman and Guitar. Due to the significant disparities in social class and status, Guitar cannot forget the scene in which Macon kicked his family out of the house during their first meeting. He will never be able to integrate into Milkman's circle of high-tone friends and will never have the opportunity to attend the elegant gatherings of the upper-class. Consequently, Guitar remains trapped in the jealousy and paranoia of a lower-class revenge seeker. Faced with Guitar's malice and pursuit, Milkman chooses not to retaliate violently. When Pilate is shot and falls in the end, he jumps off cliffs without hesitation. In this moment, Milkman is no longer a struggling white peacock with a heavy tail, but instead rides the wind like his ancestor Solomon. He is so light because he has finally grasped the true meaning of Shalimar – “If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it.” [6] When Milkman lets go of his obsession with material possessions, breaks free from the cycle of violence for

violence and defines this flight as “reaching out to others in love and communal gesture” [12] the class labels and material constraints that once held him back now become the airflow lifting his wings. Milkman’s awakening does not mark the end of his moral struggles, but rather a new starting point where he must commit to continuous self-improvement and take ongoing responsibility for his choices.

3. Conclusion

In *Song of Solomon*, race, gender and class are not separate factors, but are closely intertwined and mutually influential. Under the structural violence of racism, the upward social mobility of black people often comes at the cost of self-colonization and cultural disconnection, while the patriarchal hegemony perpetuates gender oppression, creating an intractable rift within ethnic groups. Morrison rejects simplistic and one-dimensional portrayals of these issues in her work, instead burdening Milkman’s “flight” with a triple mission of redemption: to retrieve the forgotten cultural memory of Africans, to understand the hardships faced by women in their existential circumstances, and to free himself from the shackles of class and materialism. Furthermore, Morrison transcends traditional narrative patterns by choosing to document the spiritual transformation of the upper class and oppressors through the perspective of a middle-class male, rather than depicting the suffering of lower-class women. This unique narrative perspective contributes to a comprehensive portrayal of the diversity and complexity of Black society. Therefore, this paper also introduces an additional class-based perspective, exploring the pivotal role of nature and the Other in Milkman’s rejection of his class identity and material desires, which offers a fresh approach to understanding the social critique in Morrison’s works. Drawing on the concepts from postmodern ethics, the paper further deconstructs traditional binary oppositions and emphasizes the importance of taking responsibility for the

Other. This implies that individuals should proactively reflect on the impact of their actions in social interactions, actively make moral choices and bear moral accountability in mind, thereby reconstructing a balanced moral relationship between the “self” and the “other.”

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