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### STUDY OF RACISM IN TONI MORRISON'S *SONG OF SOLOMON*

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#### ABSTRACT

Racism is an obnoxious word that has been around as long as mankind itself. It is actually can be broken down into two distinct delineations: on the one hand it simply means that groups of people are defined by their inherent differences like skin color, culture, appearance, and that because of these differences, one group is seen to be better than the other. The second explanation of racism is the unfair treatment of others based solely on these differences. Throughout history, humankind has treated others with contempt and committed atrocities upon them just because of the color of their skin or the culture from which they come. Toni Morrison, the black southerner, mediated the urge for the blacks and transmutes the peculiar proximity of Afro-American's genderized, sexualized, and racialized world into writing.

Toni Morrison is a Nobel Prize and Pulitzer Prize winning American novelist. Her novels are known for their epic themes, exquisite language, and richly detailed African-American characters who are central to their narratives. Among her best known novels are *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved*, *Jazz*, *Love and A Mercy*. Morrison's third novel the *Song of*

*Solomon*, establishes her as a major African-American writer. The story of a black man's research for his identity, through a discovery of his family history, became a best seller and drew praise from readers and critics when it was published in 1977. The novel has been especially admired for the beauty of language and its grounding of universal theme in particularity of the African American experiences, as well as for its use of folklore.

*Song of Solomon* is based on an Africa-American folktale about slaves who can fly to Africa when they choose. Morrison fictionalizes this folktale through the character of Solomon, the great-grandfather of the story's protagonist, Milkman Dead. Through his discovery of the story of Solomon and his ability to fly, Milkman learns to take pride in his ancestry and to value his connection to family and community. *Song of Solomon* won the National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction. It is now widely taught and has appeared again on the best seller lists when it was chosen by Oprah Winfrey for inclusion in her book club and it is still considered one of Morrison's best books.

*Song of Solomon* presents the effects of the middle-class values on black families as well as an exploration of African-American culture and myths that depict the conceptual notion of the ethnic experience. Racism hovers in the background, but the actual presence of white America seldom intrudes upon the action in the novel. Of the first three novels of Morrison, only *Song of Solomon* has a male protagonist, and it alone is written from a supposedly male vantage point. The focus is not primarily on the concept of woman, as in *Sula*, for its protagonist is a man bearing a peculiar, but highly symbolic name - Milkman Dead. Though Milkman's quest for his identity is the dominant strand in the novel, the major obstacle he must overcome is the deadening effects of his father's need to own as much property as possible in order to protect him against racism. This inordinate craze for ownership manifests itself in its worst forms, but is countered throughout the novel by the non-appropriative view of life, most often represented by the women. As Denise Heinze, a recent critic, says, in *Song of Solomon* "blacks are affected by a double-consciousness of racial values and gender." (Heinze 132)

Morrison has created a whole autonomous world of blacks in *Song of Solomon*. The two major characters are symbolic of all blacks and are archetypal. They are typical representatives of black life - Milkman is symbolic of all blacks and his aunt, Pilate, is the archetype of all black

women, the Great Mother. In the novel Morrison depicts how blacks take pride in being black and revels in their sense of historical heritage as the backbone of their culture.

The protagonist's growth should be viewed as three distinct yet interconnected developmental stages that lead to his increased race consciousness: the pre-liminal stage, the liminal stage, and the post-liminal stage. There are general characteristics peculiar to each, as well as particular characteristics associated with the protagonist's heightened consciousness. Milkman's liminal stage of development can be documented in particular by his increasing race awareness.

It's important to note that there are almost no white characters in *Song of Solomon*. White racism, directed at black Americans, is a real thing in the novel, but it's an offstage presence, a terrifying monster that affects how the black characters talk, think, and behave. Morrison is concerned with the way white culture shapes and imprisons black culture, and the way that white racism can cause blacks to be racist to other blacks; in other words, how blacks internalize racism.

Class is another base for discrimination of blacks in the society. Rich blacks are more snobbish than the rich whites. Macon Dead, a wealthy black businessman, uses his influence and power to squeeze money from the poorest townspeople. He does so because, in many ways, he looks down on blacks; he wants to live far away from them, in the largely white community of honour. In much the same way, Hagar comes to hate her hair and dark skin because they mark her as a black woman. She envies Lena and Corinthians, and other light-skinned black women, because they're not so obviously African; indeed, she dies of grief because she realizes that she'll never be able to look as light-skinned as the women she thinks Milkman likes. Even if they have nothing else in common, Hagar and Macon Dead share a common desire to be as white as possible. Though they're born in a black community, they come to dislike their own blackness, and gravitate toward the white people who oppress them and, ironically, regard all black people as the same.

Guitar embodies another form that racism takes in *Song of Solomon*. Where Hagar and Macon try to be as white as possible, Guitar responds to whiteness by despising it as thoroughly as whites despise him. Ever since his father was killed in a white-owned sawmill accident, he has

refused to accept any sympathy from the white community; on the contrary, he regards all white people, beginning with the man who owned the sawmill, as complicit in the murder of black people. Milkman comes to realize that Guitar, along with his organization, the Seven Days, is responsible for murdering white people in retaliation for black murders in the area. Though most of the white people he kills weren't immediately involved in crimes against black people, Guitar nonetheless considers them racists who deserve to die. Ironically, Guitar's monolithic, unsympathetic attitude toward whites is itself a form of race-based prejudice.

So the novel portrays two ways that white racism against blacks affects black consciousness. The former that of Macon Dead and Hagar, is an almost unconscious internalizing of white racism which leads to a hatred of black people, and thus, hatred of the self. The latter that of Guitar, is a retaliatory hatred of all white people. Though diametrically opposed, both responses are warping and destructive to the individual and to the society.

Milkman's awareness of race is made poignant by his personal confrontation with the police. Stripped of his dignity, emasculated like millions of other African men throughout the world, Milkman is over-whelmed with shame: "shame at being spread-eagled, fingered, and handcuffed..." (Morrison 209) Milkman's high level of race consciousness is exemplified on two occasions, when he learns of his grandfather's murder and when he participates in the Shalimar hunt. Milkman first learns of his grandfather's murder from Pilate, at a time when his race consciousness is at its lowest level. When he hears of the murder for the second time he is infuriated. He asks why the Danville Africans did not seek revenge. Milkman wondered at his own anger, he hadn't felt angry when he first heard about it. His anger is aroused on this occasion because of his heightened awareness of himself and other African people. Eventually, his consciousness manifests itself in a sincere love for his people.

Thus, Milkman sees himself as an African exploited by capitalism and oppressed by racism, but offers no solution to this dilemma. While his race and class consciousness develop sufficiently to allow him to recreate self, it never reaches the point where he moves beyond self-healing to other-healing.

In her writing of *Song of Solomon*, Morrison has not yet adequately matured to comprehend that while the African is exploited both racially and economically, their economic

exploitation forms the basis for their national oppression. In the words of Kwame Nkrumah, “while capitalist exploitation and race oppression are complementary, the removal of the first ensures the removal of the other.” (Nkrumah 27) Without such an understanding, she cannot propose a viable solution, the eradication of capitalism. By the end of it, Milkman sees himself as an African exploited by capitalism and oppressed by racism, but offers no solution to this dilemma. While his race and class consciousness develop sufficiently to allow him to recreate self, it never reaches the point where he moves beyond self-healing to other-healing.

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