

# Nature's Healing Touch: The Restorative Power of Nature in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*

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## Abstract

This paper seeks to investigate and understand the tenets of restoration in nature through Morrison's novel, *Song of Solomon*, which emphasizes how elements such as water, stones, and birds serve as useful restorative natural symbols. Analyzing the texts, the research emphasizes tree, water, and animal imagery, especially birds as a means of change for characters and narrative progression in works by Morrison. This paper explores how Morrison uses nature in a multilayered, constructive way as a means for character transformation, family storytelling, and characters' African root connection. Particular focus is placed on the transformations of Milkman Dead and Pilate's characters and the role of nature, which forms and shapes them. This paper demonstrates how, with the help of the representation of nature, Morrison addresses the pathology of the black experience and presents the potential for overcoming the trauma. The study then comprises the ideas addressed in the book by Morrison relating to today's environmentalism and post-colonialism, and reconnecting with nature and spirituality.

**Keywords:** Toni Morrison, Race, Song of Solomon, African American, ecology, culture, Healing, Nature.

## I. Introduction

*Song of Solomon*, a novel published in 1977, is the third novel of Toni Morrison, which is considered an African American classic. To be more precise, the experiences described from the perspective of Macon "Milkman" Dead III embrace his life starting from birth till the age of thirty (Morrison). Set against the backdrop of mid-1900s black experiences, the novel deals with identity, genealogy, and the search for cultural identity (Bloom).

The novel starts in Michigan and ends in Virginia, revealing Milkman's transformation and self-realization. While journeying, he discovers some family secrets, exploring the themes of love and friendship, and at the end, he learns about his ancestor Solomon, who allegedly flew back to Africa. Thus, one can observe that the novel contains a significant degree of symbolism, magical realism, and allusions to the traditions of African American culture (Wilentz).

## II. Key Aspects of Nature in Toni Morrison's Works

Nature is one of the most important aspects of Toni Morrison's works and in this case, it is presented with duality and diverse purpose as a representative of an African American female writer. Key aspects of her approach include:

- a) Nature as memory: This has the effect to tie the characters in Morrison's work to their indigenous roots of African Americans with an ancestral connection to the land (Smith).
- b) Symbolic landscapes: Toni Morrison uses symbolic landscapes to depict settings with many symbols, which point to characters' internal conditions or themes (Tally).
- c) Nature and identity: Nature is a recurrent subject in Morrison's works and in many of her fiction, characters' feelings about self-identity and culture are intertwined (Alaimo).
- d) Magical realism: Morrison frequently combines realistic representations of the world of nature or the world of the supernatural, to achieve a unique perspective (Furman).
- e) Ecological awareness: Although the theme of environmental concerns and their influence on populations is not always proclaimed in Morrison's works, there are hints at it (Gaard and Murphy).
- f) Nature as resistance: Frequently, in Morrison's novels, there is a kind of interaction with nature that may be an act of defiance against oppressive hierarchies (Lee).

## III. The Concept of Nature's Restorative Power in Literature

Smith and Tally explain the concept of nature, as the healing or restorative sphere is auspicious in literature of different genres, ages, and cultures. The idea behind this concept is that man is an integral part of nature, and that nature can offer a physical, spiritual, and emotional replenishing. In literature, this symbiosis of nature with characters is shown where certain characters go through a process of restoration in one way or the other through interaction with nature, manifesting in various ways, such as:

- a) Forgiveness and restoration of the human body through interaction with natural resources.
- b) Marital stress reduction through natural environments.
- c) Self-realization or awakening by using the natural world.
- d) Regaining one's identity or the cultural connection through the environment.

#### **IV. Ecocriticism and its relevance to African American literature**

It is a critical approach which works to analyze literary works in relation to environmental motifs. The field began in the 1970s and has grown to effectively study how literary works model nature, the environment, and man's interaction with nature.

In the context of African American literature, Ecocriticism takes particular significance as:

- A. Historical context: It looks at how African Americans' interaction with nature is defined by historical aspects including slavery and the great migration as well as sharecropping.
- B. Cultural perspectives: It deals with the subject of nature from the point of view of African Americans, figures of which inherited African roots and spiritual beliefs.
- C. Environmental justice: Examines how environmental accountability addresses questions of race and social justice especially for African American populations.
- D. Reclaiming nature: It examines how oppression is mediated through the writers' nature imagery and how African American writers have written about the land that was stolen from or rendered inhospitable by racism.

## **V. How the Natural World Restores in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon***

### **A. The natural aspect referring to Pilate and its influence on the overall personality of the character**

Pilate Dead is one of the significant images of nature's energy to renewal in *Song of Solomon*. She leads an exotic life; she possesses extraordinary knowledge; she, being a reference for other characters in the book, is nature's representative. Morrison portrays Pilate as almost elemental, describing her as: all angles, but usually effaced as a shadow. Moreover, she is one with the earth. Pilate's physiognomy is all angles, but an aspect of her is usually obliterated as if she is part of the earth. This connection to nature is evident in Pilate's healing powers, in her maternal-like characteristics and as a custodian of the family records.

*She was as tall as her father, head and shoulders taller than most men, and even her walk was so free and loose and suggestive of wings that she seemed to be flying. (Morrison 32)*

Pilate's home, which is surrounded by a pure nature and has no technologies and facilities of the twentieth century, functions literally as a sacred house for characters like Milkman and others, where they can receive spiritual healing. Pilate's sole nature-god and her ability to speak to the dead strengthen her function as the empowerer of nature's healing force. Just like Pilate, Morrison shows the audience that tender bond with nature, mother earth, is what produces strength, knowledge, and the power to restore oneself and other people.

### **B. Milkman's journey and his growing connection to the natural world**

In an exemplary manner, Milkman's journey throughout the novel illustrates nature's restorative characteristics. Leaving New York and transitioning to the Southern state of Virginia in search of his family history, Milkman is first estranged from both his African American roots and nature. He becomes more aware of his surroundings and over time becomes attached to the land; this adds to the process of his self-discovery and regaining his cultural identity.

*I wish I'd known more people. I would have loved 'em all. If I'd've loved more people, I would have been a better person (Morrison 336).*

Although Milkman causes his uncle's death, he is rewarded with material possessions and wealth so that his transformation into a man of the earth starts when he ventures into Pennsylvania, particularly Virginia. This transformation is represented in episodes indicating Milkman's desire to connect with the earth, literally, sitting with 'his back against a tree' (Morrison 279). By following Milkman's experience, the author shows the reader that contact with the natural environment can lead to the spiritual and psychological restoration of the characters as well as the cultural roots of the black community.

### **C. The symbolism of flight and its connection to freedom and healing**

Flight is used as the central motif in *Song of Solomon*, and the concept relates to the longing to return to one's African roots while also being a form of deliverance or forgiveness. This can be stated by identifying the motif of flying or the desire of leaving, as it is present in the very beginning of the novel with the act of Robert Smith and is also reflected in the final stage of the novel with Milkman's jump. Solomon, the Milkman's relative, who is said to have flown back to Africa, links flight with the themes of running away from oppression and going back to the source. Thus, as Milkman learns about this family history, flight is transformed from being a shameful activity to something that he can be proud of and can help to overcome the consequences of the genetic trauma. Another key theme that runs through the novel is that of freedom, which is grounded in Morrison's use of bird imagery; Pilate is presented and referred to as avian. The means of flight – be it literal or symbolic – is freedom from those restraints imposed by society, washer of the heart, and quite literally the chains of gravity. The novel's final discussion of constricting smallpox coincides with the desire for a form of deliverance connected to the air and therefore, the soil. "If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it." (Morrison 337). Thus, the image of flight helps Morrison depict the ideas of embodying nature and adjusting to the lost traditions to find the way to salvation. These paragraphs are devoted to the detailed discussion of how Morrison employs the concept of nature as the remedial force in *Song of Solomon* with the reference to such topics as the characterization of Pilate, the plot of Milkman's flight, and the Flight concept. All of them illustrate how natural motifs in the novel are relevant to the processes of healing, identity formation, and rediscovery of culture.

## VI. Key Natural Elements and Their Restorative Roles

### A. The significance of trees

In the novel *Song of Solomon*, trees are vital signifying functions that relate to the male ancestors and identity as well as the women's search for wholeness. There are several trees depicted in the narrative but probably the most symbolic and well-known is the tree on which Jesus was placed in Pilate's yard. It signifies stability and the mother figure from which Macon Dead II has turned his back on the materialistic world. The tree that bears fruit without blooming represents a life-giving figure which is in line with Pilate's unconventional role.

*The men and women in the trees had called him, he said. They had shouted, 'Come on! Come on!' From the trees. (Morrison 325)*

It turns to become a place of refuge and solace to Milkman. It gives him a feel of a natural and real life. Likewise, Sweet's peach tree in Virginia is correlated with rebirth and sexual awakening in Milkman's eyes. When he is close to Sweet and embraces her under the tree of the peach, he starts to come closer to his emotions and nature. Thus, trees as a symbol used by Morrison eventually stabilize characters, link them with their background, and contribute healing of emotional and spiritual aspects of the characters. Climbing trees, which Milkman does in his childhood and in Virginia, demonstrates the characters' ability to regain their original nature and elementary responses to the environment, which gives them new visions.

### B. Water imagery and its healing properties

In *Song of Solomon* water appears to be far-reaching and a very effective motif that represents notions such as: purification and renewal. Hazel herself is a major water symbolism in the novel, and therefore water science plays a pivotal role within the novel's context of setting. For transformation and revelation, water plays an important role in a character's life.

*It was a deep and holy place full of people who knew everything. They knew the beginning of all waterways, the source of all streams. (Morrison 323)*

A scene of Milkman immersing in a river during a hunting trip at Shalimar resembles a baptism and signifies a new phase in the process of Milkman's deliverance. This scene can also be interpreted as a metaphor for the purification of the protagonist's jaded, suburban unconscious self and a spiritual

transformation. The act of Pilate taking her dead father's bones to the river for washing signifies a type of purging of past torture. Morrison also applies water to help the characters establish connections with their roots; Solomon's song about merely leaping over water to go back to Africa. This same property of water being transformative and restorative is followed by a spur in the interaction that seems to depict the occurrence of change.

### **C. The role of animals, particularly birds**

The animal symbol most significant in *Song of Solomon* is that of birds and such aspects as liberty, divination and connection with the earth. Birds are presented most of the time due to the symbol of flying, which is in the center of the novel's theme. Thus, the appearance of peacocks early in the novel is significant because they signify vanity and potential for flying above the earthly world, which heralds Milkman's development. The intertextual bird, the robin, which Pilate sees when she comes back to her ancestral home, is thus the spirit guide, which reconnects her to the home and the father's spirit. Characters are made to be associated with certain types of birds, which is an amplification of their affiliation to the natural world, and the motif of flying. The climax of Milkman's reintegration with nature and his tradition is when he hears the voices of the animals hunting in the forest, in the scene set in Shalimar. This scene shows one of the major functions of anthropomorphism and how listening to animals can help one to understand themselves and the world. The usage of animals and the bird images, reemphasizes the novel's main trends such as the concept of liberty, spirituality, and reborn character.

## **VII. Nature as a Connection to Ancestry and Identity**

The topography of *Song of Solomon* is alive with detail of Milkman's family and the communities in which they live. The physical geography of Milkman's journey, as he travels towards the south, becomes an emotional geography of his family history. Each place is symbolic and holds some revelation regarding the ancestry of his family.

*He closed his eyes and thought of everybody he'd ever known and wondered what they were doing, what they were feeling... But all he heard was the ground, the trees, the sky, and his own heartbeat." (Morrison 277)*

The quote from *Song of Solomon* shows how Milkman develops strong bonds with nature during his journey toward self-awareness. During this isolated period with no distractions, he develops a perception of his natural surroundings. The natural elements of ground, trees, sky, and heartbeat serve

as symbols that reconnect Milkman with his ancestral heritage, which proves that identity finds its foundation in nature. The passage demonstrates how nature facilitates personal reflection and provides access to ancestral roots by showing the writer's theme of recovering forgotten ancestry through deep connection with the land.

### **VIII. In *Song of Solomon*, Toni Morrison Skilfully Uses Nature in Various Ways**

- a) Firstly, the trees, water and birds that are depicted in the novel are elements of nature, which act as important symbols of the concepts of regeneration and spirituality. Such elements are not only mere settings but also the agents who play an essential role in the characters' change process.
- b) Secondly, the novel describes a clear relationship between nature and the family heritage when native nature becomes the symbol of the ancestors' memory and the Aboriginal people's identity struggle. This is especially so in the case of Milkman's quest of self-identity and rediscovery when he goes down South and re-establishes his connection with the terrain and topography.
- c) Thirdly, Morrison represents nature as a force that brings change and understanding for the characters' self-identification, perhaps in no human figure so clearly as in the case of Milkman's transformation from an individual obliterated by the environment of a big city into an individual sensitive for his roots and surroundings.
- d) Fourthly, the novel associates the influence of nature as the solution to the individual and society's sins to heal the wounds of the past and accept oneself.

### **XI. Conclusion**

By analysing the role of natural setting as a healing tool in the literary work of *Song of Solomon*, one can agree with Morrison's ideas which can be applied in the contemporary society. Her approach also qualifies the western dualism of nature and culture which presents a more organic view of the world where the natural and the ascendent cultural domains are intertwined. This point of view can be attributed to typical indigenous and non-Eurocentric view on the world in which the presented ontological model serves as a critique of modern society and its detachment from the environment. Additionally, Morrison utilizes nature to impart the restoration of cultural roots in underprivileged societies and the healing from the past flaws. This has special relevance to African American literature and culture and expands to include a conception for the rest of the cultures in the current globalized age. Morrison's work also seems

to criticize materialism and the life in large cities and offer the concept of the return to nature as a solution to the problems of the human soul. Thus, by regarding nature as a source of knowledge, cure, and self, the novel promotes ecological awareness in literature, which is in anticipation of many themes of modern ecocriticism.

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