Chapter I

Introduction

Toni Morrison is one of the most prominent African-American female authors of the 20th century. It is apparent that her working life and her writings always circle around Black experiences and their construction of identity. Following the footsteps of her predecessors such as Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker, Morrison focuses her works on African-American experiences and gives voices to Black women, attempting to break down the barriers of race and gender and to achieve equality for African-American women in America's White-and- male-dominated society. However, what defines Morrison's uniqueness is her exhaustive effort to question American identities. Her constant and ambitious task is to redefine African-Americans as an integral part of American identity through both her creative work and her real life. Morrison's redefinition of American identities inspires and arouses Americans and maybe people in other parts of the world to reconsider the idea of national identity.

Morrison's life has been involved in the pendulum swing between the White western literary culture and the traditional African one. Toni Morrison or Chloe Anthony Wofford was born on February 18, 1931 in Lorain, Ohio. Her early life had been implanted with the deep rooted Black folk tradition by her grandmother's interpretation of dream symbols, her mother's singing, and both parents' supernatural stories and folktales. At the same time, she also loved to read White western authors. Her early favorites were the Russian writers Tolstoy and Dostoyevski, French author Gustave Flaubert and English novelist Jane Austen. Morrison had expanded her literary world while studying at Howard University with English and Classics as her major and minor subjects in 1953. Later in 1955, she received a master degree from Cornell University with her thesis on suicide in the works of William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf. Morrison once mentioned in an interview about the turning point of her life after leaving for school, "the things I studied were Western and, you know, I was terrifically fascinated with all of that, and at that time any information that came to me from my own people seemed to be backwoodsy and uninformed. You know they hadn't read all these wonderful

books….the consciousness of being Black I think happened when I left Cornell." (Cowart, 2000, p. 96) After graduating, she worked as an English instructor at Texas Southern University in Houston in 1955 before moving to Howard University in 1957. We can clearly see her "consciousness of being Black" when she has diverted her attention from teaching to editing Black literary works since 1964. Morrison devoted her life to Black writers and Black writings. She used to be a senior editor for prominent Black Americans like Muhammad Ali, Andrew Young, Toni Cade Bambara and Angela Davis. Also, she wrote the foreword for The Black Book edited by Middleton A. Harris, Ernest Smith, Morris Levitt and Roger Furman. After being a reader, a teacher, and an editor of literary works, she became an author, who has constantly produced numerous fictions and non-fictions concerned with Black experiences. For fiction, she first released *The Bluest Eyes* in 1970, and then *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), "Recitatif" (short story 1983), *Dreaming Emmette* (play performed in 1986), *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1998), *Love* (2003) and *Mercy* (2008). Her fictions often depict the struggles of the Black man and woman for self discovery in a White male-dominant society and the deliverance of African or Black culture in America. For example, in her first novel, *The Bluest Eyes*, Morrison depicts the tragic life of a Black girl named Pecola Breedlove who becomes a victim of society that worships the White standard of beauty (blue eyes/blonde hair). Pecola cannot resist the power of mainstream belief as she wants to possess the bluest eyes in order to be accepted by other people. Her obsession with White beauty makes her lose her mind and die in the end. In *Beloved*, Morrison portrays the construction of identity of Sethe, a Black mother who kills her child to prevent it from enslavement. Sethe lives her life obsessing over the guilt in the past until she cannot perform a proper role of mother for her present daughter. The dead child becomes a ghost named Beloved and haunts Sethe and other family members. Beloved comes both to remind Sethe of her traumatic past and heal her traumatic motherhood. Finally, she can restore her motherhood and live peacefully with her present daughter. We can see that both characters from these two stories have to struggle to discover, Pecola's selfhood and Sethe's motherhood, successfully or not. In addition, her non-fictions also emphasize race and gender issues such as *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992) and *Rac(ing),*

Justice, (En)gender(ing) Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas and the Construction of Social Reality (1992). Morrison has proved successful in her author's life with many awards. In 1978, *Song of Solomon* won both the National Book Critics Circle Award and the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Award and was chosen as a Book-of-the Month Club selection. Almost 10 years later, she received the Pulitzer Prize for fiction for *Beloved* in 1988. Other prestigious honors she received include an appointment as Albert Schweitzer Professor of the Humanities at the State University of New York in Albany in 1984 and as Robert F. Goheen Professor in the Council of Humanities at Princeton University in 1989, becoming the first Black woman writer to hold a named chair at an Ivy League University. Her recognition is not only restricted to the national sphere, but has also expanded to the international level; she was the first Black woman to win Nobel Prize for Literature, in 1993.

Song of Solomon, her third novel (published in 1977), is another representation of Black experience and the construction of identity. It has been noted as one of the most challenging novels of Morrison due to its richness in content, the deviations from other novels in the heroic epic genre, and the ambivalent notion of African-American identity. Although its fame and popularity has extended to a wider circle, Morrison modestly refers to this novel as "a very simple story…[about] a young man who seeks his fortune" (LeClair, 1981, p. 26, quoted in Furman, 2003, p. 4). The story may sound clichéd, yet Morrison changes it into an excellent narrative. She claims that she likes to "treat old ideas, old situations" and use them as tales for modern life. (LeClair, 1981, p. 26, quoted in Furman, 2003, p. 4) By rewriting the old western heroic myth and African folklore, she recreates the new story for a new generation of African-American to learn what the real 'fortune' is.

Song of Solomon presents the genealogical history of Solomon's three-generation descendents: Jake (Macon Dead the first), Macon and Pilate, and Milkman (Macon Dead Jr.). The story focuses on the construction of identity of Macon Dead Jr. or Milkman Dead, the protagonist, who undertakes a journey in the North and the South of America following the paths of two ancestors: Macon Dead and Pilate, his father and aunt. Milkman Dead was the first Black baby in the community born in Mercy Hospital on Not Doctor Street, Michigan. His lifeless and loveless family is

composed of Ruth Foster Dead, his mother, who loves him possessively, Macon Dead, his father, who had tried to kill him when he was still in the womb, Magdalene (also called Lena) and First Corinthian, his pathetic sisters who are the victims of Macon's and Milkman's selfishness. Milkman has a close friend named Guitar who exposes him to the world of poor Blacks in an urban ghetto. Milkman also has another close relative made distant (by his father). Pilate Dead, his father's hated sister, saved Milkman from Macon's murderous intention and introduced him to the simple and traditional way of life outside the boundary of his father's materialistic sphere. From Pilate, Milkman learns about his family ancestors, especially the unfortunate event that made Macon mistakenly believe that she took the gold of the dead White man accidentally killed by Macon in the cave, after preventing him from taking it. In contrast to Pilate, Macon imposes a materialistic way of life on Milkman, contending that seeking fortune is the only way to achieve freedom. With Guitar, Milkman is told by Macon to get the 'gold' from Pilate in exchange for Milkman's freedom from the Dead's house and some money for Guitar to support the Seven Days, his secret society taking revenge towards the Whites for killing the Blacks by killing other Whites with the same killing method. But the mission of stealing gold in Pilate's house fails, and Milkman chooses to go to the South to search for gold without Guitar. The journey initially is one of self interest, but it gradually shifts to a journey of self discovery. Milkman can progressively trace back the origin of his ancestors. Unfolding the riddle in the song about his ancestors' myth sung by children, he finds that his ancestor is Solomon, a Black slave who escaped the cruelty of slavery by flying back to Africa and leaving behind Ryna, his wife, with 21 children to suffer the life of slavery. The journey in the South has enabled Milkman to abandon his urban materialistic life, overcome greed, indifference and selfishness and take responsibility for people he loves. His freedom suggests a new self that he can transcend himself by altering his ancestors' flights of escape to the flight of understanding. Therefore, the 'fortune' Morrison mentioned above does not convey its financial aspect, but the spiritual one.

As far as the plot goes, it seems that *Song of Solomon* is not distinctive from Morrison's other novels that center on the quest for identity, as we can see from the tragic case of Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eyes*, the complex relationship of

two girlfriends, Sula and Nel, in *Sula* and Sethe's traumatic motherhood in *Beloved*. However, some critics, such as Jan Furman (2003, p. 8), have noticed that Morrison makes 'changes' in *Song of Solomon* by portraying several new perspectives. First, her focus shifts to a male protagonist. Apparently, all former and latter novels centrally depict female protagonists' lives such as Pecola, Nel, Sula, and Sethe in a White male-dominant society. In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison creates a male character, Milkman, as her protagonist. This new experiment provokes controversy especially over Morrison's status as a woman writer among feminist critics. The second shift is her fictional setting. Morrison moves out of her small village community in *The Bluest Eyes* and *Sula* to the broader area such as urban Michigan and rural Danville, Pennsylvania, and Shalimar, Virginia. Expanding her settings to the South of America, Morrison addresses the significance of African origin. To know one's self, one has to trace back to their ancestors and learn from them. The significance of the South and African traditions seems to be a compass that the author leads us to gain a profound understanding of African-American roots.

The exhaustive studies on *Song of Solomon* have circled around the theme of identity and the construction of identity. With Morrison's paradoxical combination of western/African, North/South, man/woman, Milkman's identity and its formation is seen as both the success and the failure of these sets of binary oppositions. Some critics who perceive Milkman's self construction as an individual's spiritual growth state that his authentic self is a victory of African/South/woman leading him the right way to live his life. On the other hand, some feminist critics claim that Milkman's authentic self reflects the patriarchal viewpoint that a man achieves his self discovery through women's sufferings. The first group of critics perceives Milkman's self construction as an individual's spiritual maturity. They focus on the integral relationship between self and the community. For them, an authentic self should not be individual, but an integral part of the community. Most of the critics glorify Milkman's successful achievement of self-maturity as he finally abandons his selfishness, which is the characteristic of the North, and embraces his community, the characteristic of the South. Each critic employs different terms to present this idea based on the binary opposition between spaces, their ideologies or representatives: North/South, urban/rural, American/African individual/community, Macon/Pilate.

In “The Quest for and Discovery of Identity in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*”, Valerie Smith (2003, p. 40) states that Milkman can break “the bonds of the Western, individualistic conception of self” and take “collective sense of identity.” Smith points out that it is a major shift of Morrison’s writings, as we do not see this notion of self in Pecola in *The Bluest Eyes* and Sula in *Sula*. In “The South in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*: Initiation, Healing, and Home”, Catherine Carr Lee (2003, p. 45) presents the thesis that Milkman can overcome “the hyper-individualization that grows out of the American culture of competition, capitalism, and racism”, which is “superficial external moorings” and accept “the communal and spiritual culture of his larger family.” Dorothy H. Lee sees Milkman’s quest as the struggle through the layers of social spaces in “The Quest for Self: Triumph and Failure in the Works of Toni Morrison”. Milkman takes his journey outward from his middle class home to the outer community in the northern city and then to the agrarian South. Lee claims that, figuratively, the protagonist “moves from selfish and materialistic dilettantism to an understanding of brotherhood. With his release of personal ego, he is able to find a place in the whole.” (Lee, 1984, p. 353) Joseph T. Skerrett Jr.’s “Recitation to the Griot: Storytelling and Learning in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*” takes Milkman’s quest as a metaphorical journey through the storytelling of his family members. Skerrett points out the opposite characterization of Macon Dead and Pilate through their storytelling. Macon Dead’s story is seen as “partial, egocentric, and defensive”, embodying the ideology of the American/North. On the contrary, Skerett (1985, p. 195) portrays Pilate as the representative of African/South characterizing her with the terms “a conjuror, a voodoo priestess, a celibate, a teetotaler, and the black blueswoman.” Skerett concludes that Milkman finally takes Pilate’s place as a new cultural courier, becoming “an improvising bluesman.” (p. 201) According to these critics, each space presented in Milkman’s journey is endowed with fixed ideology. Hence, Milkman’s new discovered self is the static product of Black rural South’s ideology that supersedes or replaces western urban North’s ideology.

The second group of critics examines Milkman’s construction of identity from the perspective of gender. For these critics the meaning of self or its construction is less significant than its function in the story. They suggest that

Milkman's self is formed through the author's use of phallocentric myth and folklore in order to reflect men's selfishness and women's suffering. The phallocentric myth refers to Milkman's western heroic characteristics or the form of heroic quest story that centers on a male protagonist. The phallocentric folklore refers to African folklore of flight in which an African man flies back to Africa to escape from the cruelty of slavery. Both male-centered literary forms are similarly believed to exclude and ignore women and their sufferings caused by men's selfishness. In Milkman's case, his construction of identity can be seen both as a consequence of men's self consciousness and a reflection of women's suffering. In this sense, unlike the first group of criticism, they see Milkman's "mature self" as a bitter glory or even an illusion, not an authentic self. In "*Song of Solomon*: Reality and Mythos within the Community" Patrick Bryce Bjork (1996, chap.5) seems to suggest that Milkman's successful self construction is the privilege resulting from the author's employment of myth. Bjork indicates that although myth and heroic characteristics help Milkman transcend the historical and cultural past and achieve self discovery, they are confined to the patriarchal vision. Moreover, the mythic structure that centers on men's quest marginalizes the role of women such as Pilate who has similar characteristics to a classical hero but cannot achieve the journey of self discovery because "she lacks a full understanding of what has transpired during her life, during her own 'quest'". (Bjork, 1996, p. 98) Michael Awkward's "'Unruly and Let Loose': Myth, Ideology, and Gender in *Song of Solomon*" describes the structure of phallocentric myth with the term "monomythic paradigms" in which "the male hero who has been called to adventure" finally finds "a mature sense of his familial obligations, an informed knowledge of familial (and tribal) history, and a profound comprehension of tribal wisdom." (2003, p. 79) Like Bjork, Awkward contends that this monomyth denies women the "access to knowledge" (2003, p. 89), and prevents them from the flight to freedom. Gerry Brenner's "*Song of Solomon*: Rejecting Rank's Monomyth and Feminism" illustrates Milkman's characteristic of western traditional hero based on

Otto Rank's notion of monomyth[1]. (2003, p. 96) However, Brenner claims that the characterization is added to satirize the protagonist's false pride of his "successful self construction", since it is merely an illusion. Brenner explains that Milkman, in fact, follows his ancestors' footsteps by abandoning women "to escape domestication, to fly from responsibilities, in the name of self-fulfillment or self-discovery or self-indulgence." (2003, p. 101) His flight does not convey the freedom of having true understanding about himself and his family members, but the escape from "the burdens of doing something meaningful in life, preferring the sumptuous illusion that he will ride the air." (p. 102) Jan Furman, in "Male Consciousness" comments that Milkman's journey from the North to the South conforms to "the classical male monomyth of the heroic quest." (1996, p. 36) Furman defines the structure of the heroic quest as that in which "the hero's adventure takes him on a journey beset with mortal danger but a journey which, in the end, brings him nobility and great honor among his people." (1996, p. 36) Yet, what glorifies Milkman's self construction is not his flight but the awareness of female suffering that his male ancestors were never concerned about. This awareness makes Milkman "fly" with full understanding. In addition, unlike other critics in the same group, Furman argues that not only does Pilate possess heroic characteristics, but she is able to complete her journey to self-knowledge. Pilate is more special and different from other women who encounter endless suffering in the story. Andrea O'Reilly suggests another kind of myth, apart from those of male dominant, which is the myth of motherhood in *Toni Morrison and Motherhood A Politics of the Heart.* O'Reilly states that the novel is the portrayal of African-American fragmented motherline as a result of slavery, migration, and assimilation. While living in the North, Milkman is imposed on by the masculine self from White western culture, defined as "autonomous, separate, and individuated."

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[1] The nine parts of Rank's monomyth map the standard saga of the hero:
1. The hero is the child of distinguished parents, usually the son of a king. 2. His origin is preceded by difficulties, such as continence, or prolonged barrenness, or secret intercourse of the parents due to external prohibition or obstacles. 3. During or before the pregnancy, there is a prophecy, in the form of a dream or oracle, cautioning against his birth and usually threatening danger to the father (or his representative) 4. As a rule, he is surrendered to the water, in a box. 5. He is then saved by animals, or by lowly people (shepherds). 6. He is suckled by a female animal or by a humble woman. 7. After he has grown up, he finds his distinguished parents, in a highly versatile fashion. 8. He takes revenge on his father, on the other one hand, and is acknowledged on the other. 9. Finally, he achieves rank and honors.

(O'Reilly, 2004, p. 100) It disconnects him from the motherline of African roots of which "the feminine sense of self is experienced relationally and in a web of interdependence." (O'Reilly, 2004, p. 100) O'Reilly contends that Milkman succeeds in his construction of identity because he finally follows Pilate, the representative of maternal path. With Pilate's guidance, Milkman "moves toward embracing the funkiness of black cultural identity." (O'Reilly, 2004, p. 95) In this sense, Milkman's identity is successfully constructed on the platform of Black African heritage. J. Brooks Bouson's " 'Can't Nobody Fly with All That Shit': The Shame-Pride Axis and Black Masculinity in *Song of Solomon*" indicates that the use of folkloric and mythic literary form obscures the conflict of shame and pride surrounding the construction of Black masculinity. What is clearly presented to us is what Bouson calls "the idea of the black experience" which is Milkman's discovery of his African-American "roots" and his "authentic" black identity. (2000, p. 75) But underneath these "black experiences" is, in fact, the "differences of class and privilege" (Bouson, 2000, p. 75), for example between Milkman and Black underclass in the ghetto there is an issue of class conflict, or Milkman's parents have false pride thinking that they are superior to other Blacks in the community. Besides, there are "the shame of the Dead's family secrets" (Bouson, 2000, p. 80) used by the family members to humiliate each other, and the violence of suicide substituted by the magical story of flight. Instead of focusing on the issue of gender bias implied in Milkman's construction of identity, Bouson relates it with the whole African-American community. In Bouson's opinion, Milkman's self construction is not glorious since it is the reflection of the "intraracial shaming, the color-caste hierarchy, and black-on-black violence." (2000, p. 101) Seeing Milkman's construction of self through a gender perspective, it is clear that myth and folklore are not commonly shared and cherished but part of the suppressive machine against women.

Another way to understand Milkman's self and its formation in the novel is through the use of or the allusion to different literary traditions and writings in the novel. The literary traditions and writings refer to various types of narrative in western and African culture such as genre, oral/writing tradition, and canonical writings that have direct and indirect impacts on Morrison's creation of Milkman and the whole novel. Unlike the former groups mentioned above, this group of critics

focuses on the intertextualized sources in connection with Milkman's self construction. For literary traditions, Joyce Irene Middleton's "Orality, Literacy, and Memory in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*" points out the significant relationship of western writing tradition and African oral culture in the novel. She cites Zora Neale Hurston's remark in "Characteristics of Negro Expression" that "the white man thinks in written language and the Negro thinks in hieroglyphics." (1993, p. 66) Middleton claims that the reason Milkman takes a long time to realize his family roots because he had used the logic of the western writing tradition, thus, he couldn't see the similarity of sound between "Solomon" and "Shalimar", the name of his ancestor and the place along his journey in the South. But when Milkman tries to listen to the sound and spell the words, he can make a connection and realize the whole story. Middleton concludes that African oral/aural tradition can lead Milkman back "home" and find his true identity. Gay Wilentz, in "Civilization Underneath: African Heritage as Cultural Discourse in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*", sees the protagonist's process of self construction as the negotiation of two different perceptions of reality: scientific perception of western culture and mythic and magical perception of African tradition. Wilentz points out that Morrison intends to restore African oral tradition and language which is "underlying cosmologies" (2003, p. 158) that exists underneath White civilization in order to show its significance towards the Black construction of identity. The employment of the 'African dilemma tale' enables us to see the ambivalent meanings of Milkman's flight at the end of the novel. From a western scientific perspective, Milkman's leap means death, while from the African mythic and magical one, Milkman can really fly. Wilentz shows that the meaning of Milkman's identity depends on which point of view we adopt. Lucinda H. MacKethan's "Names to Bear Witness: The Theme and Traditions of Naming in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon" declares that the journey towards self-discovery is the journey to find his real name, Solomon. Naming, in African-American tradition, is significant, since it signifies "gift to others" and it functions as "witness bearer to an individual's treasure of selfhood." (MacKethan, 2003, p. 189) It connects a person with his ancestral line and contains one's life history. Therefore, Milkman has to know his real name, in order to complete his selfhood. Joyce Weg compares Milkman's construction of identity and his ancestors' history with the blues song.

Weg indicates that the novel's plot is similar to the theme of the blues: "men who flee and women who lament" or more specifically "the men fly away and leave their women to sing the blues." (2003, p. 168) Milkman, to escape from his unpleasant condition and gain "freedom", rejects the love of his mother and Hagar and leaves them irresponsibly. Yet, the rejection or escape is not the right path that leads him to self-discovery. Therefore, the successful self discovery in the end of the novel is that Milkman can finally learn to embrace love and take responsibility towards his family. With his understanding, he is not really "Dead" but alive in the end. In " 'What Shalimar Knew': Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* as a Pastoral Novel", Ann E. Imbrie relates Milkman's quest to the pastoral tradition in that he "travels from this world back to […] a simpler, more primitive and 'natural' world, where he is educated in a new way, in lessons the city cannot teach him." (1993, p. 477) Milkman achieves his self-discovery only when he goes South where he discovers his family roots and learns to abandon his selfishness. He returns to the northern city with understanding of responsibility towards his family. However, Imbrie further criticizes the notion of the South as a utopian or pastoral world as Eurocentric. She asserts that the South embodies African characteristics and rituals such as the Black vernacular and the act of naming. Hence, Milkman's identity seems to be created by the combination of the two cultures: western and African. Linden Peach (2000, chap. 3), in "The 'Romance' Novels: *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Tar Baby* (1981)", argues that Morrison's construction of Milkman's quest alludes to three sources: 19th century American romance, European romance, and African myth of Anaanu. For 19th century American romance, Peach argues that the novel works with myth, folklore, and involves anti-rational structures and levels of meaning. Yet, those mythical and folklore elements are based on African or African-American ontology. For example, it employs the African Mwindo epic and the Kambili epic[2]. Despite the theme of fears of White America in 19th century American Romance, the novel is concerned with the fear of black America of gradually losing their culture and their "black" sensibilities by the pursuit of White American values (Peach, 2000, p. 65). For example, Macon Dead turns his back on his family and the communal ways of life to

[2] See Linda Krumholz (1993, pp. 536-7)

assimilate to Whites' business world. Additionally, we can also see some characteristics of European heroic quest narrative in the story,[3] in the way that Milkman overcomes his father's imposition of materialistic and selfish perception and chooses Pilate's path to achieve his identity. It possesses a similar plot to the African folktale Anaanu[4] with the myth of the flying African. The same motif of escaping the responsibility to family and lover for personal gain can be found in Milkman's quest. In relation to many types of literary traditions, Milkman's identity is also associated with the characters of canonical authors. John N. Duvall compares Milkman's self construction to Isaac McCaslin of William Faulkner's *Go Down Moses* in "Doe Hunting and Masculinity: *Song of Solomon* and *Go Down Moses*". The two characters possess the similar fate of discovering the corrupted past of their family and adopting their male ancestors' property, which leads them to disaster. However, Duvall points out that Milkman can finally break "free of certain destructive cycles of the Dead family and patriarchal social organization" (2003, p. 114) because, unlike Isaac McCaslin, he has Pilate who introduces him to a more sustaining path. Duvall asserts that Pilate leads Milkman to "reconceive [his] masculinity in a nonpatriarchal fashion, that is, in the way that does not reduce African-American women to objects to be possessed". (2003, p. 130) With Pilate's guidance, Milkman achieves his identity ultimately "transcend[ing] self and self-love". (Duvall, 2003, p. 131) David Cowart makes connections between the protagonists' formation of identity from *Song of Solomon*, Faulkner's *Go Down Moses* and Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Milkman and Faulkner's Isaac McCaslin similarly go through a genealogical quest; however, Milkman's discovery about family "liberates" (Cowart, 2000, p. 97) him enabling him to realize his Black roots, in contrast to Isaac's terrible revelation. Milkman and Joyce's Stephen Dedalus take flight in the end of the story. The similarity is that both flights can be interpreted as an escape or a transcendence.

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[3] In the traditional European quest narrative, there is usually an omen about the protagonist, either during or before pregnancy, against a birth which seems as if it will endanger the father in some way. The omen drives the father to get rid of the protagonist. But the protagonist survives and grows up to take revenge on his father and achieves rank and honours. (71-73)

[4] Anaanu is a trickster spider who escapes famine by faking death and at night eats his fill.

But the difference is that Morrison adds "ethnic definition" of flight because it "symbolize[s] black options for escaping the labyrinth of social injustice." (Cowart, 2000, p. 102) With this unique Black experience, Morrison's protagonist is distinctive from those of the two canonical authors. However, the employment of African traditions in her novel does not prove that this African-American author is Afrocentric. The characterization of the protagonist reveals the relation between *Song of Solomon* and various literary traditions and writings, far from glorifying only African culture. The round viewpoint towards Morrison's characterization can imply that the issue of identity should not be seen as a static one, but fluid and dynamic.

Moreover, there are some criticisms that perceive the construction of identity through a historical perspective. They define Milkman's journey for identity as model of African-American history. In "Dead Teachers: Rituals of Manhood and Rituals of Reading in *Song of Solomon*", Linda Krumholz presents Milkman's quest of self-discovery as learning the "discredited knowledge of African-American history and spirituality." (2003, p. 203) Krumholz claims that Morrison revises myths of Black manhood by illustrating their flight as "independence, lawlessness, and self-invention" and irresponsibility since it also refers to the "loss involved in abandoning the women and children." (2003, p. 206) Krumholz offers examples of some African traditional heroic folklore to illustrate their patriarchal viewpoint such as the myth of flying man who leaves his wife and children behind. The perception shows that African-American culture "values male characteristics over female." (Krumholz, 2003, p. 220) Thus, it seems that Morrison redefines the characteristics of mythic hero based on feminine perception. Milkman is feminized as we can see in his "mutual caring with Sweet, his attention to children's games, his use of women's gossip to unfold knowledge, and possibly his self-sacrificing act in the conclusion." (Krumholz, 2003, p. 220) In this sense, Milkman's "masculine" identity is "undermined" by the feminine characteristics he has embraced from his journey in the South.

Despite the various point of views towards identity and its construction, one thing that most of these criticisms share is the monolithic perception. Milkman's identity is regarded as static, absolute, and essential. It is the product of African/African-American rural South ideology: communal, spiritual, magic, and

feminine, as opposed to western American urban North's ideology: individual, materialistic, scientific, and masculine. Richard Heyman (1995) reveals the problems of Afrocentric interpretation in "Universalization and Its Discontents: Morrison's *Song of Solomon* – A (W)hol(e)y Black Text". The monolithic conclusion seems problematic because it essentializes African tradition as a core value of African identity. The glorification of African tradition is another process of reversing racial discrimination in the way that African culture establishes itself as a mainstream and marginalizes or suppresses other cultures, which, in fact, are as significant as African.

In fact, the novel shows that identity is not static and absolute, but more complicated. In Milkman's search for identity, we can see that he makes his journey from the North to the South of America. Because of the southward path, many critics make the same mistake by claiming that Milkman finally embraces his southern (African) self. This monolithic point of view towards his identity derives from the underestimation of the role of spaces in his journey. Apparently, the roles of both spaces are reduced to the metaphorical or allegorical settings of Milkman's quest for identity. For example, the North is merely seen as an obstacle, or the South is seen as a goal for his self discovery. Lacking the social, political, and cultural aspects of each space, Milkman's identity is eventually seen as a flat and static one. In fact, the space plays a more active role. Milkman's movement from the North to the South does not simply suggest his complete embrace of the southern self and rejection of the northern one. In my opinion, Milkman cannot abandon what he experiences from the North since it becomes an integral part of his memory. The North should not be seen merely as an opposition or an obstacle to his true self. The consequence of the encounter of both experiences is not Milkman's afrocentric identity, as some critics claim, but more plural and fluid as a new identity is constructed from the combination of the South (African) and the North (American) experiences. Obviously, the focus on the study of space can shed light on this complicated identity and its formation.

Commonly, space is a physical or geographical site containing live and inanimate objects. However, space, in this context, is not only a passive physical area, but it also carries layers of ideologies or political and cultural meanings. Some critics have mentioned these kind of ideological spaces. For example, the first and second groups of criticism classify spaces and their ideologies with the absolute sets

of binary oppositions: North/urban/American/individual/masculine/Macon and South/rural/African/communal/feminine/Pilate.

However, these sets of ideologies do not remain static in each space. Their relationship does not manifest only as an opposition, but they also often converge, merge, confront, and transform to one another. The results of these various relationships constitute themselves as "layers of meanings" in physical spaces with no obvious boundary. The urban American North is not only characterized by whiteness, modernity, materialism, masculinity, and individualism; nor does the rural South simply represent blackness, primitivism, spiritualism, femininity, and community. Some other critics mention only the metaphorical function of space in Milkman's spiritual progress. For example, Marc C. Connor points out that finding home is not, as Milkman believes, "a simple matter of geography" but that "his communal identity must be *earned*; that is Milkman must undergo his own harrowing - in the older sense of being torn, lacerated, cut through – in order to find who he is and where he has come from". (Connor, 2000, p. 60 quoted in Hogue, 2006, p. 125) In my opinion, Connor's 'matter of geography' is too 'simple' for he overlooks the layers of historical and political meanings embedded in the substantial geography and underestimates what Milkman experiences in each space only as an allegory of spiritual maturation. In fact, Morrison clearly inserts many political and cultural aspects in the places Milkman lives and visits which have shaped his perception along his journey. Therefore, focusing only on allegorical function of space leads to the simplification of individual construction of identity that lacks social and political aspects. In many of her writings, Morrison seems to hint a glimpse of spatial definition based on African-American historical, social, and political contexts. For example:

> We don't live in places where we can hear those stories anymore; parents don't sit around and tell their children those classical, mythological archetypal stories that we heard years ago. (Morrison, 1984, p. 340)

In "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation", Morrison nostalgically points out the transformation of African-American lives. The "old world" is the world of participation and close relationship of people in the family, which, according to this quotation, they no longer live in. We can automatically claim that the "new world",

in contrast, is the world of isolation and detachment. The characteristics of these two worlds imply that the "old world" by emphasizing close family relationships among people in the same community signifies the traditional way of life, while the "new world" suggests the sense of individualism and isolation of modern life. In the African-American historical context, the crash of these two worlds is the consequence of Black people's migration from the South to the North of America. After the American Civil War, the two spaces had been commonly recognized with the following set of belief; the North refers to freedom, while the South represents slavery. There was a phenomenon called "the Great Migration" starting around 1910 when over five million African-Americans moved from the South to northern cities, including the West and Midwest with hopes for freedom: escaping the violence of racial discrimination and finding greater quality of life such as better jobs and equal rights. Due to these meanings of freedom, Black Americans' transformation of life can be seen as "upward mobility" both in the geographical implication of moving upward from the South to the North and in the metaphorical one of having more advanced financial status and life quality. However, the "Master narrative" of North-as-freedom and South-as-slavery is challenged by Morrison in this novel. She seems to produce a "counter narrative" for these two spaces by suggesting that, in the African-American context, the North can be seen as "slavery", while the South represents home and family/community. Portraying the North with the widespread racial discrimination, the sense of extreme ownership, and the notion of freedom defined by wealth, Morrison seems to suggest that the North embodies a new form of slavery, which prevents the Blacks from pursuing "real freedom". For instance, the depiction of the northern Black community shows the dystopian world of conflicts among people within one family (the Deads), among people in different classes (Macon and Black underclass), or between the individual and others (Milkman and his family and community) as a result of racial discrimination, capitalism, and extreme individualism. The notions of "upward mobility" based on the discourses of modernization and individuality of the North do not parallel with their traditional way of life (giving importance to community) like they used to have in the South. For instance, capitalism with the idea of individual property promotes the dispersal of community. The process of standardization and impersonalization of urban discourse

diminishes their unique traditions and collective history. The northern promised land where they wish to improve life may not always be their "brave new world". On the other hands, the South, despite intensive racial discrimination, deprivation, and oppression towards women, is portrayed as a pastoral world being rich with African traditional culture and the sense of family and community. This can lead to the question whether or not Morrison tries to romanticize or idealize the South by presenting it as a "heaven" or an exit for northern Blacks from the dystopian world.

However, Morrison's "counter narrative" of these two spaces seems to have more function than striking back against the master narrative, since it is presented through the protagonist's point of view. Characterizing her protagonist as a northern Black egocentric man who is cut off from African-American collective history, it can be said that his point of view towards these spaces is limited and lacking political and historical aspects. For example, he can barely recognize the racial and gender conflicts both in the northern and southern societies in which he lives. He even plays an important role in the games as we can see from his cruelty towards Hagar and denial of responsibility towards the consequence (Hagar's insanity). Morrison seems to use her "counter narrative" as the "introduction" of his life lesson, detaching him from the individualistic world of the North and connecting him with the world of community in the South. However, it is apparent that Morrison does not completely romanticize or idealize the southern world since she eventually reveals what Milkman cannot see in the South. Instead of going back to the North as a "hero" who can free himself with the discovery of his family root, Morrison undermines his "heroic act" and turns him to an anti hero by triggering the issue of women's suffering as a result of men's desire for freedom. Sweet's question "Who'd he leave behind?" (p.332) shows the other aspect of the South that, despite being a pastoral world, is also involved with the oppression of people in different races (slavery) and genders (suppressed lives of Black women). By displaying both positive and negative aspects of the South, the novel seems to show Morrison's attempt to compromise on the issues of the South as "home" containing both the sense of family/community and its tragic history (slavery) for African-Americans. However, the author made changes in her later works. For instance, in Beloved, Morrison explored the trauma of Black slaves in the South by depicting a female

slave, Sethe, whose life is so ruled by slavery that she kills her own child in order to protect it from becoming a slave. Therefore, it can be said that *Song of Solomon* is the turning point in the subject of her writings as the novel is her introduction of the southern world after her emphases on the northern world in *The Bluest Eyes* and *Sula*.

These historical backgrounds parallel with the themes of Black Americans' encounter of these "two worlds," and their impacts on Black individual are constructions of identity. In her early writings, *The Bluest Eyes* and *Sula*, Morrison depicts Black migrations to the cities precipitating Black incorporation into modern American capitalism (Bjork, 1996). In *The Bluest Eyes*, Morrison demonstrates how the process of commodity and mass production culture affects Black female subjectivity. In spite of being a poor Black girl, Pecola yearns for "the bluest eyes", the symbol of western beauty presented through a White girl image on cheap candy's package. With the bluest eyes, she believes that she will be accepted by her community. However, her dark black skin and "ugly" face makes her suffer rejection not only from her community, but also her own parents. Similarly, in *Sula*, Sula is the victim of The Bottom community's bourgeois standard of perfect womanhood (being a proper daughter, wife, and mother). Because of her "improper" behaviors (e.g. witnessing her mother's burning body with extraordinary calmness, wearing a weird outfit, having free sex even with her best friend's husband), the neighbors see her as a devil that brings bad luck to their lives. Clearly, in these two novels, Morrison presents Black individual exploited selves due to the dispersing community distorted by urban bourgeois values. In this sense, the "upward" dream might not be the exit to freedom for Black American. In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison seems to offer them the way out to "real freedom" by going "downward", in both the metaphorical and physical senses of returning to the original roots or a traditional simple way of life attached to community, which can be completed only by going down to the southern land, the cradle of Black American life. By going southward and learning about his family roots, Milkman can achieve his self discovery, unlike the two female protagonists in *The Bluest Eyes* and *Sula*. Hence, it implies that "the South" or African traditions play a major role in the northern Black individual's construction of authentic self. With the protagonist's successful self-construction due to the juxtaposition of the two worlds, *Song of Solomon* can be seen as the

conjunction of these two worlds, since Morrison seems to give more emphasis to the "old world" (the rural South, African root) in most of her later novels. In addition to *Beloved* where Morrison focuses on the traumatic life of a female ex-slave, in *Tar Baby*, Morrison embraces the traditional African myth. The mythic tribe of blind horsemen and the swamp women, the descendants of the slaves who were struck blind the moment they saw the island, are metaphoric representations of the African cultural past (Billingslea-Brown, 1997). Or in *Jazz*, Morrison embodies African-American aesthetic production of blues patterns and the structure of jazz performance to illustrate the tragic married life of Joe and Violet Trace with the Jazz Age as its historical background (Rubenstein, 1998). These post-*Song of Solomon* novels indicate Morrison's emphasis on reviving African or African-American cultures. Therefore, it can be said that *Song of Solomon* is the significant conjunction where the two spaces meet, conjoin, and negotiate in terms of the North as the "house" and the South as the "home" performing an important act of cooperation in constructing African-American identity, since they are "curiously intimate" and yet "unhingingly separate" (Imbrie, 1993, p. 487). Milkman has to experience varieties of dominant ideologies embodied in each space, which at first lead him to have an identity crisis. However, he finally encounters contested space - a certain space embodying layers of political and cultural ideologies. As a result, the contested space enables him to create a pluralistic self in a way that the combinations of the two spaces generate a fluid self. In other words, he can finally form a heterogeneous identity, since he has to encounter the process of "wearing" and "stripping" many layers of ideologies. It shows that self construction is not a finalized process, but an ongoing one.

In the next chapters, the relationships of space and identity formation will be clarified. In "Chapter II The North Space: The Landlocked Space and the Incomplete Freemen", I will illustrate the protagonist's male ancestors' interpretations of the north space that lead them to their self formations as incomplete freemen. In "Chapter III The South Space: The Housebo(u)nd Space and the Communal Identity", I will portray Milkman's female ancestors' definitions of the south space that determine their communal identity. In "Chapter IV The Reinterpretation of Spaces: Milkman's Identity Crisis and Formation of New Identity", I will display the multiple ideologies of the north and the south space that cause Milkman to have an identity

crisis. Also, I will present Milkman's encounter of the contested space, which finally enables him to create a heterogeneous identity. Finally, in "Chapter V: Conclusion", I will conclude what the study of space, in particular contested spaces, leads to in reinterpreting African-American identity.