**Magic World in *Song of Solomon*: A Return to Black Culture**

[Ping Du](https://www.tandfonline.com/author/Du%2C+Ping)

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**ABSTRACT**

Magic realism, originated from Latin America, manifests mainly three artistic principles in *Song of Solomon*: first, confusing the boundary between reality and fantasy to create a magic world, where man and ghost coexist and co-communicate. Second, employ mythological archetypes to endow reality with fabulous meanings. It helps to show how American black women fight against cultural oppression and keep their cultural heritage and traditional values. Lastly, *Song of Solomon* also uses some techniques such as allegory and symbolism to convey the themes. A “Solomon’s song” reveals the miserable fate of American black women and their role and function in their men’s journey.

**中文摘要**

魔幻现实主义起源于拉丁美洲，其在托尼·莫里森的《所罗门之歌》中，主要以三个艺术原则体现：首先，混淆了现实与幻想的边界，用以创造了人鬼共存并相互交流的一个魔幻世界。其次，采用神话原型来赋予现实寓意，展示出美国黑人在与文化压抑相抗争、保留文化遗产和传统价值观方面的努力。最后，《所罗门之歌》还运用了一些手法来传达主题，比如寓意和象征。一曲“所罗门之歌”揭露出美国黑人女性的悲惨命运以及她们在男人的旅程中所扮演的角色和所起到的作用。

KEYWORDS: [*Song of Solomon*](https://www.tandfonline.com/keyword/Song+Of+Solomon), [magic realism](https://www.tandfonline.com/keyword/Magic+Realism), [black culture](https://www.tandfonline.com/keyword/Black+Culture), [American black women](https://www.tandfonline.com/keyword/American+Black+Women)

关键词: [《所罗门之歌》](https://www.tandfonline.com/keyword/%E3%80%8A%E6%89%80%E7%BD%97%E9%97%A8%E4%B9%8B%E6%AD%8C%E3%80%8B), [魔幻现实主义](https://www.tandfonline.com/keyword/%E9%AD%94%E5%B9%BB%E7%8E%B0%E5%AE%9E%E4%B8%BB%E4%B9%89), [黑人文化](https://www.tandfonline.com/keyword/%E9%BB%91%E4%BA%BA%E6%96%87%E5%8C%96), [美国黑人女性](https://www.tandfonline.com/keyword/%E7%BE%8E%E5%9B%BD%E9%BB%91%E4%BA%BA%E5%A5%B3%E6%80%A7)

**1. Introduction**

Toni Morrison is one of the most famous writers in American literary field. As an excellent novelist, she also achieves global reputation. Since the publication of the *Bluest Eye* in 1970, she has steadily produced six more novels such as *Sula, Song of Solomon, Tar Baby, Beloved, Jazz*, and *Paradise*. Starting with her first novel, she has captivated audiences with such magic worlds as Medallion and the Bottom where blackbirds appear unexpectedly, Darling and Not Doctor Streets where dead father’s bones are kept indoors unburied, Isle des Chevaliers where warrior spirits gallop on horseback, and 124 Bluestone Road where a ghost becomes flesh and blood. By presenting these magic elements in her novel, Morrison guides readers to probe into the black-cultural world which has been neglected for a long time by the main stream white culture. She was valued highly by readers all over the world. Besides the honorary degrees from Ivy League colleges such as Harvard, Yale, and Columbia, Morrison has won many other honors including a National Book Critics’ Circle Award and the Pulitzer Price. In 1993, she was granted the Nobel Prize.

*Song of Solomon* is Toni Morrison’s third novel which is always regarded as one of the masterpieces of Morrison and is the only novel which uses a black male as the protagonist of the novel. It is chiefly on the strength of this book that Morrison has gained the Pulitzer prize and the National Book Critics’s Circle Award. The novel tells about a story of a young black man Milkman Dead. At the age of 32, he leads an idle and skimble-skamble life in the society in which the white culture is the main cultural stream. Later, under the guidance of his aunt Pilate, he starts his life journey of searching for “gold” – his family history, racial identity, and cultural heritage. Through the journey, he associates with his folks and his traditional culture and finally finds out the deep meaning of the *Solomon’s song*, which conveys the story of his ancestors and the history of African-American people.

**2. The origin and development of magic realism**

It is generally said that the earliest mention of “magic realism” is found in Franz Roh’s work of painting and sculpture that was popular following the Expressionist movement in 1925. The term referred to a style of painting that emphasized minute aspects of an object and in which real forms were combined in a way which did not conform to daily reality.

In 1948, the term came to use as a narrative technique. It is first employed by a writer named Arturo Uslar Pietri. He wrote in *The Literature and Men of Venezuela*:

what became prominent in the short story and left an indelible mark there was the consideration of man as a mystery surrounded by realistic facts. A poetic prediction or a poetic denial of reality. What for lack of another name could be called a magical realism. ([Uslar Pietri](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/25723618.2017.1387979) 13)

Two elements function during the process. On one hand, many Latin American writers were attracted to Paris where the Surrealist movement greatly influenced them during the period of 1920s and 1930s. On the other hand, most of them were aware of their native countries’ abundance of writing materials, and they turned back to write their own continent. On the continent full of such historical and social contrasts where the frontiers between the real and the imaginary were so close, this made it difficult to distinguish one from another, and it seemed natural that its writers used this style as a means of expressing Latin American complexities as well as showing the need for questioning and affirming cultural identity. Aware of how literature could derive from dreams and the unconsciousness, they marry the artistic principles of surrealism to the magic realities of their own continent. Thus, a new literary genre, which was later called magic realism, was created. This later use of the term was quite different form Roh’s and it emphasized the importance of belief in the magic nature of the phenomena. “Latin American Literature Boom” reached its climax during the 1950s and 1960s, and more and more Latin American writers turned toward the trend of magic realism and developed its techniques to maturity. Among them, Garcia Marquez is considered as the leading practitioner. His masterpiece *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is a perfection of Latin American magic realism.

Despite the debate and the criticism of magic realism, few people would deny that this mode had played an important role in the development of international literature in the twentieth century. Expressing powerful sociopolitical sentiment within a rich imaginative form, the mode not only became extremely popular among Latin American writers and readers but also gained an international following. Magic realism becomes a vehicle for the exploration and assertion of cultural, social, and political identity. Writers in America as elsewhere borrow the stylistic and thematic elements from their Latin American forerunners but make some alterations according to their specific purposes.

**3. The meaning and main artistic principles of magic realism**

Magic realism is a literary form that combines fantasy with raw physical or social reality in a search for truth beyond the surface of people’s daily life. It attempts to create “new reality” or to treat the existing reality with a different perspective as a way of presenting the mystery inherent in writing. Its definition was clarified as the following:

[…] magical realism cannot be identified either with fantastic literature or with psychological literature, or with the surrealist or hermetic literature that Ortega describes. Unlike superrealism, magic realism does not use dream motifs, neither does it distort reality or create imagined worlds, as writers of fantastic literature or science fiction do; nor does it emphasize psychological analysis of characters, since it doesn’t try to find reasons for their actions or their inability to express themselves. Magic realism is not an aesthetic movement either, as was modernism, which was interested in creating works dominated by a refined style; neither is it interested in the creation of complex structures per se. ([Parkinson Zamora and Faris](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/25723618.2017.1387979) 121)

Unlike surrealism, magic realist writers do not try their efforts to find the values of their creation from the world of dreams or aim at the pursuit of the characters’ absolute spiritual freedom by reconstructing their dreams and subconsciousness (or even unconsciousness). Instead, they never avoid the objective world. Magic realism is not licensed for any arbitrary distortion of reality for its own sake, just as Garcia Marquez pointed out:

You can’t invent or imagine just whatever you fancy because you run the risk not telling the truth…. Even the most seemingly arbitrary creation has its rules. You can throw away the fig leaf of rationalism only if you don’t then descend into total chaos and irrationality. ([Garcia Marquez](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/25723618.2017.1387979) 87)

In fact, it actively turns the natural into some sort of the supernatural or the magic “reality” through their narrative discourse. Although there are some similarities between the two, magic realist works are not equal to the fantastic fictions as Angel Flores says they are in his *Magic Realism in Spanish American Fiction* because the latter usually twists the reality or create a fantastic world. Magic realism is, in Leal’s words, “an attitude towards reality” ([Flores](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/25723618.2017.1387979) 121) and further, “the magic realist does not try to copy the surrounding reality (as the realists did) or to wound it (as the surrealists did) but to seize the mystery that breathes behind things” ([Flores](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/25723618.2017.1387979) 123). It never avoids the real world by creating a fantastic or imaginary world, and it even faces the real world directly, reflects the reality profoundly, and presents the mystery existing in everything, every life, and action of humankind.

However, literature is not a pure reality. It needs processing and refinement to become the literature reality. The magic or marvelous in the works is not mere the writer’s imagination, but the narration and processing of the really existing magic things or from the sources of the local myth, legend, religion, and tradition. Although the magic serves only as subordinating plots and details without ruining or corrupting the accordance of the main plot with the objective reality and the logic development, it is indeed part of the reality of Latin America consisting of the objective reality and the subjective reality in people’s minds. As a mature and successful literary form, magic realism possesses its unique artistic principles. A number of critics have attempted to define this protean style in various ways, but all seem to agree on the following artistic principles as being basic to the genre:

First, the contradiction inherent in the description of magical events in the most prosaic manner and of realistic happenings presented as something extraordinary and supernatural. The practice aims at forcing the reader to participate in the construction of the meaning in the work. Its most common form is to turn reality into the magic without losing its realness. That is, blending the reality and the non-reality by creating extraordinary figures, describing ridiculous plots and adapting miraculous narrative techniques to achieve “another sense” of the reality. It reflects the incredible miracles and the absolutely real life in Latin America, which impresses on the reader an extremely strong sense of ridiculous realness through esthetic appreciation. Magic realism tries to dim the boundary between reality and fantasy, and the confusion of the real and the magical, of the possible and the impossible creates or reflects a magic world by which truth beneath the marvels is revealed. Second, the representation of the supernatural is a particularly forceful means of asserting a given “reality” because it can bring into images, characters, and roles (from myth to fairy tale, etc.) that appear to reflect a collective unconscious. Archetypes are common within the examples of magic realism. They carry the weight of centuries of common belief. Magic realism employs mythological archetypes (from Greek myths to western traditional folklores) to convey or emphasize what kind of truth of reality would be revealed in the work of magic realism. Lastly, in creating these new realities, magic realist texts regularly employ a number of techniques, which can generally be found in most works of this mode, while not specific to them. Magic realist texts abound in ambiguity and ambivalence, in doubles, in repetitions and in dualities. Repetition and multiplicity are basic to the meaning of magic realism in general. The ambiguity that is implicit in the combination of the magic and the real is repeated in almost every aspect of the mode.

In the world’s literary field, magic realism has gained a high reputation for its unique and marvelous artistic techniques and has been highly praised by both critics and readers. In the meanwhile, magic realism has opened the door for many writers to explain their national and ethnic identities in a different and more original way. Toni Morrison is one of them. With the mysterious African mythological and techniques of magic realism, she wove a magic coat for her themes that her novels want to convey. From the first *The Bluest Eyes* to the late *Paradise*, she shows her excellent craftsmanship of employing magic realistic sills by presenting natural cycles, mythic archetypes, bizarre events, and narrative technique. In almost all her novels, her interest in mysticism and the supernatural is obvious. Examples are abundant. There are Pecola who gets her desired blue eyes from a spiritualist with magic power named Soaphead Church in *The Bluest Eyes*, Ajiax’s conjuring mother in *Sula*, the headless Knights’ visits in *Tar Baby*, and the navelless shaman Pilate who is always carrying her dead father’s bones in *Song of Solomon.*

However, in all these novels, magic realism is with her and constantly communicates with him in *Song of Solomon*, not the only way to convey themes. Morrison just employs some of these artistic principles of magic realism. Since *Song of Solomon*, her third novel, was enthusiastically and widely received after its publication, Morrison was promoted into the rank of the most revered contemporary writer, and her skills of employing magic elements were developed into maturation. The magic atmosphere permeates the whole text. The themes of the novel are built up on the basis of magic realism, and the three artistic principles are demonstrated to a full length. Thus, in the article, I will discuss magic realism in this novel and also its functions in building up the themes.

**4. Coexistence and communication of man and ghost**

In African religion, death, like birth, is only a form of life transforming into another form of life. The living dead are always present during the period of Sasa, in which as long as their names are remembered, their individual immortality is guaranteed. If no one is left alive to remember them personally, they enter Samani, the period of collective immortality, the community of spirits, and the realm of myths and stories. The world of living and the world of death are believed to be able to communicate and exchange information. This ancient view of death and living is applied to magic realistic works to describe the life, producing a unique magic effect. Pilate’s father, Macon Dead I, who is killed by a white, is still with her. To Ruth, she says: “I see him still. He is helpful to me, real helpful. Tells me things I need to know” ([Morrison](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/25723618.2017.1387979) 142). Also under his deceased father’s mysterious guidance: “but you can’t fly on off and leave a body” ([Morrison](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/25723618.2017.1387979) 142), she goes back to the cave and carries the bones with her all her life. Later, the bones are proved to be not the bones of others, but the remains of her beloved father. Giving the dead voice is the consignation of the interpretations of the author’s deep intention, the works’ deep meanings, and the nation’s deep souls. Hidden in the odd, mysterious, and marvelous figures and plots, ghost conveys profound realistic meanings.

**5. Names, naming, and misnaming – a return to black culture**

Morrison emphases two things in *Song of Solomon*: flight and name, which can be traced back to the lines before the chapters start: “Ancestors could fly/Children may know their names.” (1) African people are sent to America as slaves and cut off all the connections with their ancestors – their true names. The absence of names haunts their life. As Morrison explains:

Among blacks, we have always suffered being nameless. We didn’t have names because ours are those of the masters which were given to us with indifference and don’t present anything for us. It’s become a common practice, among the community, to give a name to someone according to their characteristics: it’s life that gives you a name, in a way. ([Pasquier](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/25723618.2017.1387979) 12, my translation)

Appropriate to the mood of mystery, the establishment of a sense of subjectivity and representation, the novel begins with a masquerade. As we go on, it takes us some time to straighten out the characters. The several main characters, however, soon emerge as the story begins. Among the audience watching Robert Smith’s suicidal flight, a pregnant woman who drops her covered basket, spilling red velvet rose petals is Ruth Forster, and her unborn baby is Milkman. The two half-grown daughters with her are Milkman’s two sisters, Only Magdalene and First Corinthians. The poorly dressed singing woman at the back of the crowd is Milkman’s aunt, Pilate. The little boy sent to the emergency office by the white nurse is Milkman’s close friend and later his enemy, Guitar. In the disguise of “namelessness,” almost all the main characters are put on the stage. The nameless state of blacks symbolizes the painful oppression they suffer and their miserable life of slavery and even after their liberation. The conflict of the white and the black is conveyed in the naming of this fiction. The name “No Doctor Street” is given by the local black people to Main Avenue, which “gave Southside residents a way to keep their memories alive and please the city legislators as well” ([Morrison](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/25723618.2017.1387979) 4). And they also call the charity hospital at its northern end “No Mercy Hospital.” The nature of naming is the form of power and authority. For Toni Morrison, power is the power of naming.

Naming – so essential in African tradition – is a representation of a traditional belief which is accepted as part of the black cultural heritage. Bernard W. Bel in “The Afro-American Novels and Its Traditions” points out that as soon as a child is born, he should be named by his father and called by this name. What’s more, only by this way, can he become “Muntu” (an integrated human). Otherwise, he remains as a substance called “Kintu.” Even after his death, he cannot be mourned by people or get a rebirth and will be soon forgotten by people. Thus, to American black people, name means divinity, ancestors, and the witness of their root and history. Though important it is to them, they have no power to name as they wish. The white bestow names upon them. The conflict between the two races also lies in the white’s misnaming of blacks. The misnaming of this fiction is about the story of the origin of “Macon Dead” (Macon is Dead). The name is bestowed on them by a drunken Yankee registrar who mistakenly writes down the information given by Macon’s father: that his hometown is Macon and that his father is dead. He wants to change it, but his wife, Sing, insists in keeping it because it means wiping out the past of slavery. This misnaming symbolizes three meanings: (1) the white’s indifference attitudes toward blacks (the drunken white registrar); (2) the white’s power to control blacks (register and naming); (3) the white’s abuse of the power mentioned above (misnaming). A black is misnamed “Dead” by a white registrar the moment he just gets freedom and hopes to begin a new life! Circe’s words occur to readers: “White people name Negroes like race horses” ([Morrison](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/25723618.2017.1387979) 243). The name “Macon Dead” forebodes black people’s newly obtained freedom is doomed to end with death in the world of the while where God is also a white.

Blacks are “nameless” because given names cannot recover a pre-slave past, both as Circe tells Milkman in the novel. Names carry no meaning for the black ex-slaves in the new world, and as Morrison herself states: “If you come from Africa, your name is gone” ([LeClair](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/25723618.2017.1387979) 375). The only names which carry meaning are the nicknames, such as Milkman, Guitar, Porter, and so on. Milkman’s journey to the south has one central purpose: to give back all these African ex-slaves their names, their real names. Kimberly Benston explains this practice of renaming as a way of reestablishing a historical self-identity and racial identity. For the Afro-American, he notes:

Self-creation and reformation of a fragmented familial past are endlessly interwoven: naming is inevitably enealogical revisionism. All of African American literature may be seen as one vast genealogical poem that attempts to restore community to the ruptures or discontinuities imposed by the history of black presence in America. ([Morrison](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/25723618.2017.1387979) 152)

Toni Morrison’ fiction displays an extensive concern with the erasure of African cultural consciousness and cultural history. The cultivated lack of cultural historical consciousness and the displacement of “peoplehood” which it generates are a central theme of *Song of Solomon*. Naming becomes a means of bridging the violent gaps left by history. One such gap presents itself to Milkman after his journey to south. There Milkman finally knows the importance of names. The power to name is the power to mark, the power to locate and identity. People get names “from yearnings, gestures, flaws, events, mistakes, weaknesses. Names that bore witness” ([Morrison](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/25723618.2017.1387979) 330). His surname “Macon” witnesses his grandfather’s slavery, and “Milkman” reveals his mother’s breeding and love for him. On his way back to the north, he reads the road signs with interest, thinking:

How many dead lives and fading memories were buried in and beneath the names of the places in this country. Under the recorded names were other names, just as “Macon Dead,” recorded for all time in some dusty file, hid from view the real names of people, places, and things. Names that had meaning. No wonder Pilate put hers in her ear. When you know your name, you should hang on to it, for unless it is noted down and remembered, it will die when you do. ([Morrison](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/25723618.2017.1387979) 329)

Milkman recognizes that only by knowing what lies beneath the names of people, places and things, can he find his self-identity. Name is the carrier of history and culture after people’s death, and the surrealistic myth of “Solomon’s flying back to Africa” guides the origin of the black culture back to the ancient Africa – the black’s hometown. Therefore, name helps black people find not only their self-identity but their sense of spiritual belonging. After the discovery of his family name and his ancestors’ story from the song, children are always singing, and Milkman is full of pride and love for his race, which lead to his genuine freedom. At the end of the fiction, he can “ride” the air, and the ability of flying refers to his completed union with his race and his real return to the black culture.

Some names adopted from Bible take an ironic and sometimes absurd but symbolic and allegoric in *Song of Solomon*. In fact, since childhood Morrison is greatly influenced by Bible. Once in a conversation she frankly admits that Bible is part of her life. Pilate is one of examples. Her father chooses her name by pointing to a word in Bible that he cannot read. When he is told that it is a man’s name and what’s more, “the name of the man that killed Jesus,” he stubbornly keeps the name by saying “I asked Jesus to save me my life.” “Pilate” has double meanings. The name of the murderer of Jesus allegorizes her inherent prowess and power to make defiance with the society to achieve her own freedom and also help others to achieve their freedom. Having the same pronunciation as “pilot,” it symbols her sacred duty to guide Milkman to search the family identity and finally learn “If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it.” Similarly, the other biblical names in the novel have nothing to do with their original bearers. Magdalena who is called Lena hates and distains men and First Corinthians refuses to abide by his father and brother and “sees a man” ([Morrison](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/25723618.2017.1387979) 214). Reba (Rebecca) has neither a husband nor sons and indulges in herself and in her promiscuity. *Song of Solomon*, the name of the book itself, is obviously taken from Bible, but even the “Book of Books” has different interpretations under different cultures.

**6. Exaggeration and absurdity – unavoidable elements to reconstruct mythic archetype**

During the course of reconstructing the mythological archetype, exaggeration is naturally used by magic realist writers. Exaggeration is the frequently used expression technique in literary creation. Based on reality and under the help of imagination, writers grasp some certain features of objects and make them exaggerated or emphasized so as to maximize their characteristics of nature as well as achieve artistic effect. In *Song of Solomon*, this skill of displacement is used more common, bolder and more marvelous. In fact, Toni Morrison does not stop here, and she tries an extreme exaggeration and displacement, that is, absurdity. Her fiction extremely maximizes the melting of the limits of time and space of the universe and exaggerates the oneness of dream and reality to greatly strengthen the artistic effect of transformation. Although many plots and characters have a great distance away from the archetypes of life, they never go beyond the limits of reality. They are still a reflection of reality, but a transformative and subjective one. There is such a description:

But the water mark, hidden by the bowl all these years, was exposed. And once exposed, it behaved as though it were itself a plant and flourished into a huge suede-gray flower that throbbed life fever, and sighed like the shift of sand dunes. But it would also be still. Patient, restful, and still. ([Morrison](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/25723618.2017.1387979) 12–13)

This passage can respond to what Carl G. Jung calls a “psychic” truth: “Physical is not the only criterion of truth. There are also psychic truths which can neither be explained nor proved nor contested in any physical way” ([Jung](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/25723618.2017.1387979) xi). The purpose of the absurdity here is ostensibly to tell us the origin of the nickname “Milkman,” but actually to imply Ruth’s dull, desperate, and miserable life. “Almost as tall as he was,” Pilate is suddenly “shorter,” and when standing there in the receiving room of the jail, “she didn’t even come up to the sergeant’s shoulder – and the sergeant’s head barely reached Milkman’s own chin” ([Morrison](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/25723618.2017.1387979) 206). At the police station, Pilate thus frees Milkman and Guitar, outwitting his brother who teaches Milkman that his money can settle all the matters. Another example is the magical power of Milkman’s urine that can kill a plant. Urine is more ordinary than anything else in people’s daily life, but under the pen of Morrison, it is endowed with a magical power and turns into something supernatural that implies Milkman’s inherent magic power that later helps him to search his family identity, and also the national and cultural identities.

**7. Solomon’s song – a song belonging to black women**

Folktales, myths, and legends are communal property of the African-American people and so are the Blues and jazz. The folk songs, one of the main structural elements in *Song of Solomon*, express the archetypal collective consciousness of African-Americans – their aspirations for freedom and their struggles for wholeness, which are deeply rooted in black cultural values. Songs are carriers of black culture and history and the story both begins and ends in the song. The magic tales of flying and tunes are interwoven together to situate readers within that folk tradition and its African roots.

In the fiction, the folk song *Solomon’s song* has appeared many times, and each time has a close connection with Milkman. His mother is suffering from birth pangs and gives a birth to him the next day on the company of the powerful contralto:

O Sugarman done fly away

Sugarman done gone

ugarman cut across the sky

Sugarman gone home…. ([Morrison](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/25723618.2017.1387979) 6)

The song and Smith’s suicidal flight are doomed to drop Milkman into a “flying” complex of his whole life. The person who loves to sing the song is Pilate, and it is just from her Milkman that for the first time hears the song which has a predestined relationship with his whole life:

Pilate began to hum as she returned to plucking the berries. After a moment, Reba joined her, and they ummed together in perfect harmony until Pilate took the lead:

Sugarman don’t leave me here

Cotton balls to choke me

O Sugarman don’t leave me here

uckra’s arms to yoke me

When the two women got to chorus, Hagar raised her head and sang too.

O Sugarman done fly away

Sugarman done gone

Sugarman cut across the sky

Sugarman gone home. ([Morrison](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/25723618.2017.1387979) 49)

This time the song is chanted by Pilate, her daughter and granddaughter, and the words of the song are more complete. The song is sung as a song to lead Milkman home. Milkman of that moment is a puzzled and confused black young man, who lives in the world where “God is also a white” and every moment feels a sense of brink. He notices that “one of his legs was shorter than the other” ([Morrison](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/25723618.2017.1387979) 62) and his face “lacked coherence, a coming together of the features into a total self” ([Morrison](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/25723618.2017.1387979) 69) when he looks himself at the mirror. The former implies his lack of the understanding of his culture while the latter is the manifestation of his incompetence of understanding himself. Here at Pilate’ house, when hearing the song, he experiences family’s harmony, warmth, care, and love which he has never had. It is also the song that leads him back to his “home,” where the whole piece of song is sung by Shalimar’s children in the game everywhere:

Jake the only son of Solomon

Come booba yalle, come booba tambee

Whirled about and touched the sun

Come konka yalle, come konka tambee

Left that baby in a white man’s house

Come booba yalle, come booba tambee

Heddy took him to a red man’s house

Come konka yalle, come konka tambee

Black lady fell down on the ground

Come booba yalle, come booba tambee

Threw her body all around

Come konka yalle, come konka tambee

Solomon and Ryna Belali Shalut

Yaruba Medina Muhammet too.

Nestor Kalina Saraka cake.

wenty-one children, the last one Jake!

O Sugarman don’t leave me here

Cotton balls to choke me

O Sugarman don’t leave me here

Buckra’s arms to yoke me

Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone

Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home. ([Morrison](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/25723618.2017.1387979) 303)

The song has reached its climax here, and so has the story. After experiencing so many “baptisms,” Milkman gets an epiphany here: it is the song of his family history! “Solomon” in the lyrics is his grand grandfather, the flying African in the legend, who is sold from Africa to America as a slave and later flies back to Africa, and only his wife Ryna and twenty-one children are left. It is the children’s song that helps him to find his family name “Solomon” and family history and also to reach his spiritual grown-up. All the different parts of the story Milkman hears from Pilate, Circe, and the women of Shalimar fall together in this children’ song, and it reminds him of Pilate’s song where Solomon has been changed into Shalimar and then altered into Shalleemane and Pilate’s sugarman. The metaphorical connection between the several different pronunciations, in Bonnie Barthold’s words, is the sweet and spicy scent of ginger, the odor of an African market. Songs are magic: it can cut across time and place, pass on history from one generation to another, and let children remember their ancestor’s sweat and blood. Thus, in the preface of the book, Morrison puts “Daddy – Fathers can fly, and children may know their names.”

Morrison depicts a black man’s growing of her mind. As to her, two things mark a black man’s grown-up: one is his understanding of his native culture; the other is his understanding of the women of his race. As for Milkman, “Women are the main source of knowledge.” That’s to say, he should mainly learn from women. In the fiction, Milkman is always surrounded by some ordinary or extraordinary women and his growing and the journey to search his root begin and end in women. He owns his life to two women: his aunt Pilate and his mother Ruth. Milkman’s father marries Ruth for the money she inherits from his father, and feeling only contempt and hatred for her, he stops making love with her for as long as almost 20 years. Under the help and conspiracy of Pilate, Ruth can conceive again and successfully gives a birth to Milkman.

The folk song, in the book, reveals an important motif: flying. It implies a “spiritual channel,” a spiritual success. However, the lyrics reveal the negative effect of flying: The personal success of flying is often at the cost of his wife, his children and even others else. Just as Morrison once says in one of her conversations, the archetype of “flying man” in black culture tells about a kind of solemn and stirring resplendence, and this heroic behavior does leave some consequence and pity, that is, the abandoning of others. In the song, Solomon flies away, abandoning his wife Ryna and his 20 sons for her to raise. The loss of her beloved husband has put Ryna in great agony. She, while watching Solomon’s Leap at the Ryna’s Gulch, screams and screams, loses her mind completely. In fact, this is a song wife sings for his leaving husband. What conveys through it is the wife’s endless sadness and despair, but inside the endless sadness and despair is her deep love for him, a sort of love that is doomed to be unilateral forever and can never get a return. Ryna is the archetype of the women who are thirsty for love and happiness but gets nothing. Ryna dies, but many new Rynas come up one after another. Their lovers never give them their love and even maltreat them although they don’t have to fly away because they don’t live in slavery like Ryna’s husband. New Rynas are more miserable than the old one. Ruth and Hagar, Milkman Girlfriend, are among them. Ruth wastes her valuable youth on her miserable life resulting from her tragic marriage. Hagar is more unfortunate. She is more like Ryna, a sort of woman who would mad, die, or something when her man leaves. Milkman is once infatuated with her, but once she falls love with him, he is getting tired of her like an eaten chewing gum and calls her as “the third beer” ([Morrison](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/25723618.2017.1387979) 91), not the first one “which the throat receives with almost tearful gratitude” ([Morrison](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/25723618.2017.1387979) 91), nor the second one which “confirms and extends the pleasure of the first” ([Morrison](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/25723618.2017.1387979) 91), but the third one which “you drink because it’s there, because it can’t hurt” ([Morrison](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/25723618.2017.1387979) 91). Women, to him, are mere tools to satisfy himself. Later, in order to get rid of her, he even refuses her love mercilessly, which leads to her final decay. When he is in the forest by himself during the hunt, he recalls Hagar and feels remorseful for all the bad things he has done to her. It is Hagar who makes him realize the importance of loving others and regain his ability of loving. Hence, later he returns to Sweet’s each expressions of love:

She put salve on his face. He washed her hair. She sprinkled talcum on his feet. He straddled her behind and massaged her back. She put witch hazel on his swollen neck. He made up the bed. She gave him gumbo to eat. He washed the dishes. She washed his clothes and hung them out to dry. He scoured her tub. She ironed his shirt and pants. He gave her fifty dollars. She kissed his mouth. He touched her face. She said please come back. He said I’ll see you tonight. ([Morrison](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/25723618.2017.1387979) 258)

In Milkman’s journey to the south from Michigan to Denville and down to Shalimar, from Pilate to Grace and Susan, they guide him one by one, making him come more and more close to his ancestors, understand his native culture, and finish his spiritual maturation: from a dedicatee to a dedicator. So in the last page of the book, when the dying Pilate asks him to “sing a little somethin” ([Morrison](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/25723618.2017.1387979) 336) for her, he who knows no songs and has no singing voice sings for the lady: “Sugargirl don’t leave me here/Cotton balls to choke me/Sugargirl don’t leave me here/Buckra’s arms to yoke me” ([Morrison](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/25723618.2017.1387979) 336). It is from women that Milkman who never sings gets the singing voice. It is true that he finally succeeds in finding his family story, but his mother would never have conceived him without Pilate and it is Pilate who guides him to find himself, mainly through her singing.

In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison has retold the folk tale of the flying Africans. Besides paying tribute to their supernatural power, their cunning wit, and their desire for freedom, she has celebrated those who are left behind: the crying women. They are left behind not only to weep and to perish but to keep the song alive. Similarly, the success of Milkman’s journey is based on female sacrifices for male identity, and the women, including Pilate, are victims. Pilate is the most powerful character in the story. She is calm, confident, and independent; she is kind and sympathetic; she is able to find her right place between the nature and the society and lead a life in her unique way; she is bestowed with magic power which enables her to talk with her dead father and get out from her dead mother’s belly without a navel. Her crucial role as trickster and conjure woman becomes evident once more the night she gets Milkman and Guitar out of jail. Pilate shows the typical image of black women – “an immortal, an Eros, a street lamp and an incarnation of God of Protection for other people.” For Milkman, Pilate is so. She still cares about him even before his birth; she lets him feel being loved and teach him how to love; she protects and saves him from the danger … and even in the end of the story, when she follows Milkman back to hometown, at Solomon’s Leap, she uses her own body to protect him and is shot to death by Guitar. When she is dying, she says to Milkman: “I’d wish I’d a knowed more people. I would of loved ‘em all. If I’d a knowed more, I would a loved more” ([Morrison](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/25723618.2017.1387979) 336). Pilate gives her dear nephew the last lesson, making him finally realize that it is by *love* that life makes sense, and from her he gets the “voice” to sing out the song at the end of the story. Pilate is the singer of life. She always sings. She sings when Mr. Smith jumps off Mercy hospital; she sings when Macon sneaks to her house, yearning for the past; she sings when Milkman is drawn to her place. She sings Solomon’s song. Solomon’s song is Pilate’s song, black women’s song, and the song is the tale of the African ancestor, Milkman’s “great-granddaddy,” who “lifted his beautiful black ass up in the sky and flew on home” ([Morrison](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/25723618.2017.1387979) 327), leaving behind the women with his children to pass on the story.

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**Additional information**

**Author information**

**Ping Du**

***Ping Du*** teaches English literature and translation at Foreign Language College of Guangdong University of Finance & Economics. She is also a PhD candidate in comparative literature at Sichuan University. Her interests in scholarship include comparative literature, literary translation, and cultural criticism. Du’s recent article publications include “论 ‘跨文化’ 背景下的变异学研究” (“On Variation Theory in the Context of ‘Cross-culture’”), *Cultural Studies and Literary Theory* (2014), and “Rewriting, Ideology and Poetics in Goldblatt’s Translation of Mo Yan’s *天堂蒜薹之歌 (The Garlic Ballads)*,” *Comparative Literature and Culture* (2015). E-mail: [duping78@163.com](mailto:duping78@163.com).