跨世代創傷記憶與喪父危機 —–
論述童妮．摩里森之《所羅門之歌》

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摘要

童妮．摩里森的第三本小說《所羅門之歌》，作者所關心的議題仍然鎖定在遺忘或謹記創傷過去的困境。在《摯愛》和《所羅門之歌》這兩本小說中，摩里森探討關於記憶和她的族人所經歷之創傷歷史。透過重新詮釋，使得非裔美國人能欣賞他們的文化遺產、重新看待過去，甚至重建自我認同。在《摯愛》裏，摩里森談到奴隸制度的立即後遺症，經歷奴隸制度的黑人有著非常鮮明的痛苦記憶，而在《所羅門之歌》這本小說裏，摩里森探討的則是第二代、第三代，甚至第四代的後代的跨世代創傷記憶。

本篇文章分為三個部份，第一部份敘述記憶的理論，包括記憶、隔代記憶、跨世代創傷記憶等。此其雖非親身經歷的事件，但對後代子孫來說，創傷的記憶卻如鬼魅般追趕著且必須持續承擔著。第二部份談及非裔美國人社群中的跨世代創傷記憶。南北戰爭後，非裔美國人社群中的跨世代創傷記憶更為複雜，一方面為種族歧視的情況持續發生，另一方面則是非裔美國人的主體認同喪失了。最後一部份，討論男主角乳兒（Milkman）在這本小說中的改變。主要探討非裔美國人在族裔與男性意識的身分認同追求過程中，與他們跨世代創傷記憶和被欺壓的歷史有深切的關係。在亡者（Dead）這個家庭裡，因跨世代創傷記憶使得這個家庭一代四代都活在祖先的創傷中，每一代的男人都必須回應和處理失去父親、身分認同、親屬連結和傳統所帶來的影響。喪父危機或失去父親的痛成為每一代亡者家庭男人生命中最傷痛的事件，甚至帶來一連串的創傷後遺症。這個家庭創傷記憶就這樣一代一代代地傳下去，一直到乳兒這一代，他是一個沒有過去、沒有根、沒有名字、沒有傳統文化的人。乳兒的自我認同及尋根之路代表每一代非裔美國人必須經歷的過程，透過這樣的追求，才能重新找回文化遺產以及他或她的主體性。

關鍵詞：創傷、跨世代創傷記憶、隔代記憶、跨世代歷史記憶、克服／醫治創傷、黑人男子氣概

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Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma and the Crisis of Fatherhood in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*

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Abstract

In Toni Morrison’s third novel *Song of Solomon*, the dilemma of forgetting or remembering the traumatic past persists to be the issue of her concern. In both *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon*, Morrison is preoccupied with the remembering and the rewriting of the traumatic history her fellow blacks have suffered so that they may truly appreciate their cultural heritage and, then, as a result of this renewed appreciation of their collective past, reconstruct their identity. However, in *Beloved* Morrison talks about the immediate aftermath of slavery—the trauma of the first—generation survivors whose memory of their slavery past is still fresh and painful, whereas in *Song of Solomon* Morrison deals with the acquired memory of the second—, third—, or even fourth—generation of those who have direct experiences of slavery. This paper is divided into three parts. The first part deals with the theoretical frame of memory, postmemory and intergenerational transmission of trauma—the problematic of the trans—generational haunting of a memory which is not directly one’s own, but is nevertheless a memory to be claimed as one’s own. The second part tackles the issue of the intergenerational transmission of trauma in the black community, which is more complicated after the Civil War due to the persistence of racism on the one hand and the loss of African American subjectivity on the other hand. The last part discusses Milkman’s transformation in the novel. I attempt to examine how the complexity of African American identity and manhood is closely related to the trans—generational haunting of African Americans by memories of oppressions. The intergenerational transmission of trauma in the Dead family attributes to a family line of four generations, with each of them having to find different ways to respond to and negotiate with the impacts of the traumatic loss of their father, identity, kinship, and tradition. The crisis of fatherhood or paternal loss becomes the major incident for every Dead man and entails a chain of traumatic effects. The family trauma is transmitted transgenerationally until it comes to Milkman who becomes a man without a past, without roots, without names and without traditions. Milkman’s quest for his roots and subjectivity represents a quest every black has to get through in order to reclaim his/her heritages and obtain his/her subjectivity.

**Key Words**: trauma, intergenerational transmission of trauma, postmemory, trans—generational haunting, work through, black manhood

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In Toni Morrison’s third novel *Song of Solomon*, the dilemma of forgetting or remembering the traumatic past persists to be the issue of her concern. In both *Beloved* and *Song of Solomon*, Morrison is preoccupied with the remembering and the rewriting of the traumatic history her fellow blacks have suffered so that they may truly appreciate their cultural heritage and, then, as a result of this renewed appreciation of their collective past, reconstruct their identity. However, in *Beloved* Morrison talks about the immediate aftermath of slavery—the trauma of the first—generation survivors whose memory of their slavery past is still fresh and painful, whereas in *Song of Solomon* Morrison deals with the acquired memory of the second-, third-, or even fourth—generation of those who have direct experiences of slavery. When slavery has been a generation away and when all the first—generation survivors have died, how can the traumatic history be known and remembered by the following generations? Is the knowledge of blacks’ ancestral past important to their descendants? What will a man without the past be? Without the knowledge of their ancestral past, can blacks construct their racial, cultural, and ethnic identity? In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison tackles the problematic of the trans—generational haunting of a memory which is not directly one’s own, but is nevertheless a memory to be claimed as one’s own. The intergenerational transmission of trauma to subsequent generations is a phenomenon haunting the offspring of survivors of historical traumas. Descendants of the traumatic survivors still have to work through traumas which do not directly belong to them, even though they still haunt them nonetheless.

In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison delineates the dilemma caught by the offspring of those who have experienced the cruelty of slavery firsthand. As descendants of those victims of slavery, they have been called upon by the ghosts of their ancestors either to claim the deceased’s memory of trauma as their own or to resist to own this painful memory. To forget is an easier task; however, it also puts one in the danger of feeling alienated from one’s parental past. The novel’s protagonist, Milkman Dead, inherits the legacy of ancestral traumas and becomes a man disconnected with his familial, racial and communal past. Wandering aimlessly and homeless in life, Milkman hangs around with his buddy Guitar, sleeps with the granddaughter of his aunt Pilate and is indifferent to anything. He sees no necessity in understanding his ancestral and racial history. There is a paragraph in the novel which illustrates vividly how Milkman resists the burden of memory and the responsibilities that might follow the knowledge of his parental past:

He felt off—center. He just wanted to beat a past away from his parents’ past, which was also their present and which was threatening to become his present as well...And his efforts to ignore it, transcend it, seemed to work only when he spent his days looking for whatever light—hearted and without grave consequences. He avoided commitment and strong feelings, and shied away from decisions. He
wanted to know as little as possible, to feel only enough to get through the day amiable and to be interesting enough to warrant the curiosity of other people—but not their all—consuming devotion. (180)

Milkman is burdened with his parents’ past and prefers to know and feel as little as possible. With the disclosure of the bag of gold which causes the split of his father and his aunt, Milkman feels a new self emerging within himself because of the new purpose he has found in life. His journey to the South is an escape to “beat a past away” so that he can get the gold and live on his own. However, his hunt for gold ends up getting him more involved with the memory work of his ancestral and racial past. Once Milkman initiates his quest, he is fascinated but also haunted by his ancestral history and starts to feel anger and shame for the ancestral past that he has not experienced before then. Morrison in this novel pinpoints the consequences of the intergenerational transmission of trauma. Even though Milkman does not experience the ancestral trauma personally, he manifests posttraumatic symptoms nonetheless. In this paper, I am going to examine how the complexity of African American identity and manhood is closely related to the transgenerational haunting of African Americans by memories of oppressions—the pain of slavery, exploitation, humiliation, and racism—that are theirs to have whether they like it or not. The intergenerational transmission of trauma in the Dead family attributes to a family line of four generations, with each of them having to find different ways to respond to and negotiate with the impacts of the traumatic loss of their father, identity, kinship, and tradition. The crisis of fatherhood or paternal loss becomes the major incident for many characters in their life and entails a chain of traumatic effects. Milkman’s quest for gold turns out to be his search for both identity and black manhood, and in so doing, he alters his relationship with himself, his family and his race, and positions himself in the stream of African—American history.

Postmemory

Marianne Hirsch in her book Family Frames coins the term ‘postmemory’ to differentiate survivor memory from its secondary, or second—generation memory, of which the basis lies in displacement, vicariousness and belatedness. Hirsch’s postmemory most specifically describes the relationship of children of Holocaust survivors to the experiences of their parents, experiences that constitute the children’s memory through narratives, testimonies or images. In her definition, postmemory is “distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection” (22). Hirsch’s postmemory is directly connected to the past and in relation to generations but its connection to its object or source is mediated “not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation,” for postmemory “characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither
understood nor recreated” (22). Therefore, postmemory is noted for its inseparable bond to the past, yet its link to the past is fragmentary and indirect. Hirsch’s notion of postmemory is connected to Henry Raczymow’s “memory shot through with holes” (413), which also defines the indirect and piecemeal nature of second-generation memory. Hirsch argues that photography is a form of mediation that transmits the cultural memory to the subsequent generations who do not have the experience of the past yet have been nevertheless shaped by it. Photographs serve as the “enduring ‘umbilical’ connection to life,” the medium connecting first—and second—generation remembrance (23). For her, the Holocaust photos are “the leftovers, the fragmentary sources and building blocks, shot through with holes, of the work of postmemory” (23). For Raczymow, a contemporary French writer, writing is the only way that he can deal with the past or “a recreated past”—“a question of filling in gaps, of putting scraps together” (413). The representations of postmemory, either through photos or writing, affirm the past’s existence and connect the present with the past.

Postmemory is a powerful form of memory because the work of postmemory “defines the familial inheritance and transmission of cultural trauma” (“Surviving Images” 8). The notion of postmemory comes from the recognition of the belated nature of traumatic memory. If trauma can only be experienced belatedly, through after-effects, then it can also be transmitted across generations. Thus, postmemory characterizes the deferred effects of trauma and the transmission of trauma to individuals or communities that are at least one generation away from the experienced trauma. Though postmemory is a familial inheritance, Hirsch clarifies, it doesn’t need to be “strictly an identity position” (“Surviving Images” 9). She sees it as “an intersubjective transgenerational space of remembrance, linked specifically to cultural or collective trauma” (“Surviving Images” 9). It is through identification with the survivor or witness of trauma that the temporal and spatial distance between the participant and the one born after it is bridged.

The term postmemory also describes the dilemmas of memory and identity experienced by the offspring of the survivors of cultural or collective trauma. For the descendants of the survivors, it is a question of owning the traumatic experiences or memories of others as one’s own. They are often ambivalent about knowing their parents’ traumatic past and inscribing it into their own life story. Since postmemory involves an ethical relation to the survivor of trauma, the descendants are caught in the dilemma of remembering or forgetting the other’s memory as one’s own. Hirsch argues that “Perhaps it is only in subsequent generations that trauma can be witnessed and worked through, by those who were not there to live but who

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1 An important contemporary French writer, Henri Raczymow is concerned with the situation of the children of Holocaust survivors in France. A Jew himself, Raczymow in the essay “Memory Shot Through with Holes” traces the orphaned status of Jews not only to the impact of the Holocaust but back to the effects of the Jewish Enlightenment. Raczymow’s concern with the holes in the memory of contemporary French Jews best illustrates the paradox of being haunted by a memory that is not one’s own, which resembles to Marianne Hirsch’s notion of postmemory. In Family Frames, Marianne Hirsch cites Raczymow’s notion of “shot through with holes” (23) to describe the function the Holocaust photos serve in the second-generation remembrance.
received its effects, belatedly, through the narratives, actions and symptoms of the previous generation” (“Surviving Images” 12). Thus, the children of the survivors who live under the influence of the narratives, actions and symptoms of their parents receive the effects of trauma and involuntarily incorporate their parental trauma and memory as part of their life no matter they want to own the traumatic experiences or memories or not. Since the transmission of trauma to subsequent generations is compulsory and involuntary to the descendants of the survivors, they witness trauma and manifest post-traumatic symptoms nonetheless. Therefore, the task to face the inherited trauma and work through it becomes theirs.

**Transgenerational Haunting or Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma**

Memory can be obsessive; memory can also be transgenerational obsessive, as in the situation of postmemory, which is potent evidence that one is obsessed not with one’s direct experience but with someone else’s. Nicolas Abraham in “Notes on the Phantom” examines a belief prevalent in all civilizations about the return of the dead to haunt the living. To be more specific, the dead who have been shamed during their lifetime or who have taken unspeakable secrets to the grave can return to haunt the living. Abraham introduces his theory of transgenerational haunting by arguing that the phantom is “an invention of the living” and “a metapsychological fact” (75). However, Abraham also clarifies that it is not actually the dead who haunt the living, but “the gaps left within us by the secret of others” that are haunting us (75). Putting his theory of transgenerational haunting in the context of familial transmission, Abraham argues that the preoccupation with “‘the burial of an unspeakable fact within the loved one’” (76) seems to be the effect of being haunted by a phantom. The gaps, or the unspeakable holes left by the secret of others, perpetuate “the phantom effect,” which usually manifests in the form of acting out as well as some other traumatic symptoms. Mysteriously, the phantom effect seems to pass on from generation to generation with a variation of acting-out and traumatic symptoms, even though the parents themselves might not be the actual victims but have inherited from their own parents and are now transmitting to their reluctant offspring. Maria Torok with whom Abraham co-writes the book *The Shell and the Kernel* defines the term phantom as “a formation in the dynamic unconscious that is found not because of the subject’s own repression but on account of a direct empathy with the unconscious or the rejected psychic matter of a parental object” (181). Therefore, for Abraham and Torok, the phantom is a figure of the transgenerational haunting of trauma, and the offspring are possessed and haunted not by their own unconscious but by their parents’ through an identification and a direct empathy with them.

A similar notion is seen in Dominick LaCapra’s intergenerational transmission of trauma, which he defines as “the way those not directly living through an event may nonetheless
experience and manifest its posttraumatic symptoms, something especially prominent in the children or intimates of survivors or perpetrators who are possessed of, and even by, the past and tend to relive what others have lived” (“Trauma Studies” 108). The transmission of posttraumatic symptoms to others occurs through the combination of either the conscious processes such as education, verbal expressions and narratives, or the unconscious or less controlled processes such as identification or mimeticism, symptomatic acting—out or compulsive repetition of posttraumatic effects. LaCapra argues that “the experience of trauma may be vicarious or virtual, that is, undergone in a secondary fashion by one who was not there or did not go through the traumatizing events themselves. In the vicarious experience of trauma, one perhaps unconsciously identifies with the victim, becomes a surrogate victim, and lives the event in an imaginary way” (“Trauma Studies” 125). By thus identifying with those intimate members of one’s immediate family circle, the descendants vicariously experience the actual or imagined pains of others. As a consequence, second traumatization is possible to occur in those who are closely related to the victims or even in those reacting to the representations of trauma. The effects of trauma can be transmitted inter—or trans—generationally.

The intergenerational transmission of trauma to others is more probable to occur especially to those whose survival is closely connected with one another such as in a family, group, or community, since in the family, group, or community, the affect is more intimately attached, and life is more closely related. Very often, the more distinct differences of one group from others are, such as distinctions of class, race, ethnicity, or oppression, the stronger bonds within a group and the more identification with the victim arise. Usually when a member of a group endures shameful and humiliating traumas, the other members undergo variations of traumatic stress, shame, humiliation and sense of helplessness. Children of the traumatized are more often the unwitting victims and are probably the most influenced among these since their life and affect are more closely associated with those of their parents. The more the offspring of the traumatized identify with their parents, the more they share their parents’ traumatic symptoms.

**Intergenerational Transmission of Trauma in the Black Community**

Slavery, as LaCapra claims it, marks a founding trauma for African Americans. If historical trauma is a loss instead of an absence, then the trauma of slavery produces the

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2 In “Trauma, Absence, Loss,” Dominick LaCapra meditates if the Holocaust is to be functioned for the Jews as a founding trauma, a traumatizing historical event that “becomes the basis for collective or personal identity, or both” (201). For LaCapra, a founding trauma can be the Holocaust, slavery, apartheid, or nuclear bombing that provides the psychological source of a group of people’s new identity.
greatest loss for African Americans. For black slaves, families are ripped apart, mobility is restricted, human dignity is devastated, bodies are mistreated, and subjectivity is annihilated. During hundreds of years of slavery, black slaves have been objectified, dehumanized, and debased to the lowest. After the Emancipation, though the system of slavery has ended, racism persists, and racial oppression continues to be a reality that African Americans have to bear with, embodied as it is in the multitude of forced social and legal practices that African Americans have to confront with and succumb to on a daily basis. Race becomes a marker for justifying the subordination of blacks as a segregated group and for whites to do whatever they please without legal punishment. Blacks continue to live in a life—threatening, economic exploitative and racist social environment.

The intergenerational transmission of trauma in the black community is more complicated after the Civil War due to the persistence of racism on the one hand and the loss of African American subjectivity on the other hand. Haunted by a history of oppression, from the time of slavery to the continued racial exploitation and persecution, blacks live not only in the aftermath of slavery but also in a constant struggle both against racism and against the loss of racial identity. After the Civil War, though institutional racism has been abolished, implicit racism continues. Random violence and humiliation are potential threats to blacks’ dignity and self—esteem. The memory of the history of exploitation and oppression plus the social reality of racism prompts African Americans either to take concentrated efforts to forget their painful past or to become fixated on their losses. The former takes an assimilation stance and the latter, perennially mourning over their losses, attempts to reconstruct their dignity by imagining an African American identity that is racially distinct. The aftermath of slavery, yoking with the continuous effect of racism, demands the black community to reflect on the question of how to connect with their past in a way that these racially distorted perceptions can be exposed as fiction and rewritten to produce in the African American community a racially productive attitude both towards themselves, their personal worth and dignity, and their community.

Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* is a novel that tackles in a poetic way the problematic of postmemory. Morrison puts individual experience in a larger political frame, claiming that psychological trauma is always situated in a social context. Therefore, postmemory situates itself at the intersection of the public and the private, for memory of the traumatic events for an individual is always already framed in the larger cultural memories and historical experience. The novel *Song of Solomon* explores the issues of postmemory and examines the intergenerational transmission of trauma or of posttraumatic symptoms as haunting revenants. In the novel, Morrison comes to grip with transgenerational haunting—generations born after slavery, such as Milkman, are still haunted by a memory that is not directly theirs and yet they have to take part in the working—through of a history that is not their own. Milkman nonetheless manifests posttraumatic symptoms due to experience he
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does not have. Indifferent and cold, Milkman completely loses touch with the past and the
tradition and therefore loses bonding with his people, his community and his race, and much
worse, his cultural linkage and racial identity. Milkman realizes that something is lacking
in him, which he thought was freedom. He does not know that he “loses” something until he
embarks a journey to the South. In his journey to seek freedom, he finds more valuable
treasure, the bonding with history, race and community, instead. Connection is possible
only if he starts a quest south to re—connect himself with the past.

Folklore as a Medium for Transmitting Communal Culture

In the linkage with the past, folklore becomes a means of transmitting generational
beliefs and memories. Hirsch claims that the Holocaust photos function in linking second—
generation memories of cultural or collective traumatic events and experiences. As the
Holocaust photos serve as the medium to transmit generational memories, in Song of Solomon,
folklore, myths and legends provide the vehicles to pass on cultural inheritance and connect
generational remembrance. The folk song that the children in Shalimar sing in a game
carries Milkman’s ancestral history and memory and serves as a medium for transmitting
communal culture. Collective memory is deeply connected with the construction of culture
in a community, and folklore is by definition the expression of a community—of the common
beliefs, values and experiences comprising the traditions and the identify of a group.
Houston A. Baker Jr. argues that black folklore rests at the foundation for “tradition” for “the
custom, practices, and beliefs of the black American race (of the group in which the talented
black writer has his genesis) are clearly and simply reflected in the folklore” (19). Folk
tales, folk songs, myths and legends offer cultural knowledge and beliefs that are based on
African American traditions and heritages through the modes of storytelling and orality. In
the novel, the beliefs in the “flying Africans,” magic and ghost and the use of folk tales and
songs all reveal the cultural traditions and heritages of African American community. In an
interview, Morrison mentions: “I also wanted to use black folklore, the magic and
superstitious part of it. Black people believe in magic…It’s part of our heritage. That’s
why flying is the central metaphor in Song…” (Watkins 46). For Morrison, folklore and
songs not only serve as the connection to pass on cultural memory and inheritance but are
also forms through which people meditate histories, both personal and cultural.

By basing Milkman’s identity quest on a folktale, Morrison emphasizes, on the one hand,
the importance of cultural heritage and transmission, and on the other hand, the importance of
individual’s bonding with community. The folksong of Sugarman/Solomon’s flying away
provides clues for unveiling Milkman’s repressed familial and ancestral history. Folklore
provides not only the connection to cultural events and experiences but also a linkage to one’s
community. The knowledge of ancestral and communal history and spirit is essential in
forming individual identity and his/her sense of community. Since folklore represents a shared belief and memory of a group of people, it bonds communal people and provides sense of roots and belonging to a community. The belief in the flying myth that black slaves could fly provides blacks transcendence and consolation over their suffering and pain and instills racial pride and self-esteem in blacks. In the novel, Milkman’s aunt, Pilate, is the cultural bearer and the keeper of the oral traditions. Pilate’s rootedness to the past and the tradition affects Milkman to re-connect with the culture of his people and his community. The folk song Pilate sings throughout the novel becomes the key to Milkman’s understanding of his ancestral history. Pilate is his mentor to further his understanding of his cultural roots and subjectivity. The sense of intimateness and connection Milkman feels toward the black community enables him to work through his inherited trauma and heal his indifference and coldness.

By inserting into the novel mythical elements derived from African American oral traditions, Morrison gives Milkman’s spiritual quest an epic dimension. In using folklore, myth and legends in *Song of Solomon*, Morrison introduces black people’s acceptance of the supernatural, which is another way of looking at the world. In “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” Morrison states that besides a profound rootedness in the real world, black people also accept what is called superstition and magic. For Morrison, blending the two worlds together at the same time in the fiction is enhancing, not limiting (342). The beliefs in the flying Africans and the talk with the deceased, the characterization of a woman without a navel but with magical power and the like all provide the novel with mythical elements, which make Milkman’s mission more epic-like. The quest is heroic, significant and with grand dimension. In order to find redemption, Milkman has to go through trials and tribulations and through rituals of manhood to achieve maturity. As he is capable of connecting with the past and perceiving the world as alive, he works through the haunted trauma and positions himself within his family, community and society. Milkman’s quest for roots and spirituality represents an ordeal that every black has to go through—the search of his/her meaning of blackness and identity in the hostile environment of America.

**Paternal Loss as Trauma**

In *Song of Solomon*, the trauma of losing the father becomes the major incident for many characters in their life and entails a chain of traumatic effects. Jill Matus in her analysis of the novel claims that *Song of Solomon* is “a novel about fathers, or more specifically, the loss of fathers” (72). The absence of the father and the failure of the father to protect and nurture the children constitute generations of fatherless blacks who mourn over their losses and their orphaned status. Living their lives without direction, the fatherless generations are divorced from their tradition and are constantly searching for a father figure. Jake, the later
Macon Dead the first, who acquires his last name because of an error made by the government official on entering his name to the registry, accepts the mistaken name and marks generations of the Dead family who suffer paternal absence and loss and spiritual emptiness as the name indicates. Both Macon the first and Mac on the second live under the trauma of parental loss, for their fathers are victims of slavery and racism respectively. Milkman’s father, though is still alive, cannot present himself as a productive role model because he himself is fatherless, lacking paternal nurture and guidance. The absence of the father figure hampers their mental growth and the construction of their subjectivity and manhood. Macon the first seeks prosperity and Mac on the second material possession as compensation for their paternal loss, while Milkman chooses passive attitude toward life. The post-traumatic symptoms manifested in their lives reveal the impact of the intergenerational transmission of trauma.

In *Song of Solomon*, the family history of the Dead family constitutes a paradigm for the intergenerational transmission of trauma in which all the Dead descendants live under the impact of their ancestors’ trauma. The misnaming of the first Macon Dead marks a legacy of the family line which is spiritually and culturally dead. Solomon, as legend has it, flies off to Africa to escape his enslavement but only to leave his bereft wife out of her mind and twenty—one children without father. Solomon’s flight is a marvelous act of resistance to the inhumanity and cruelty of slavery as a racist social institution; however, it also registers the trauma of paternal loss which hampers all the Dead men. According to Susan Byrd’s version of the old folklore, Solomon’s wife, Ryna, his twenty—one children, and everyone who work in the field see him lifting up in the air like a bird and flying off in front of their very eyes. The shock, the unexpectedness and the unbearable pain of being abandoned by her husband cause Ryna to scream out loud for days, and she loses her mind completely. The song the children sing “O Solomon don’t leave me here” tells Ryna’s grief and her mourning over the loss of her loved one. Ryna’s Gulch, a ravine where the noise of wind blowing sounds like a woman crying, is named and remembered by the town people in Shalimar for those who are abandoned and left behind like Ryna.

For Solomon, home means his homeland, a geographical place and origin where his identity is located. Removed from the indigenous land and culture, black slaves constantly refer to Africa as their homeland, an imagined origin through the construction of politics, memory and desire. The pride the people in Shalimar feel for Solomon, a flying African, by claiming kinship to him or being named after him, represents black slaves’ collective longing for returning home and transcendence over oppressions and hardships. Living in America where he finds himself excluded and persecuted, Solomon chooses to fly off to Africa and leaves his wife and twenty—one children behind. As the ending of the folklore song indicates—“Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home,” Solomon’s home is set in the far—away continent where he comes from, not in the land where he and Ryna establish their
family. Solomon’s home is the place where he is accepted and where he belongs. In order to go home, he has to leave home. Solomon’s flight initiates a series of distortions in the concept of home. Every Dead descendant seeks to pursue his own interpretation of home at any cost.

Solomon’s heroic flight leaves not only his wife but also his children perpetually in trauma. Jake, who later becomes the first Macon Dead, is the baby Solomon tries to take with him but later drops near the porch of the big house where Heddy finds him. This incident marks Jake’s traumatic loss of his father. The injunction that Jake makes, posthumously, to Pilate—“you just can’t fly on off and leave a body” (147) discloses his trauma of being abandoned by his father and the consequences of bereavement, loss and distortion. As a baby, Jake suffers parental loss and is reared up neither by his own parents nor by his own people. Heddy, an Indian woman without a husband, finds him and takes care of him when his father leaves them all. Jake and Heddy’s girl Sing grow up together, and neither of them knows their own father. After the Emancipation and when blacks’ mobility is not restricted, Sing goes away with Jake on “a wagonful of ex—slaves going to the promised land” (243). For some reasons, Sing leaves her mother and brother behind and does not want to be found. Morrison in the novel does not explain why Sing wants to “wipe out the past. Wipe it all out” (54). However, it is clear that Jake’s traumatic past and slave status are what they both want to forget and leave behind so that they can start anew.

If Solomon’s leaving is to seek his home, his native homeland, then his son the first Macon Dead’s going north is to build his home in the promised land. Like his father, the first Macon Dead leaves his people, his community, his foster mother and brother—everything which has been connected to him at that time—for the pursuit of his dream. He and Sing do intend to leave Shalimar for good and do not want to be found. They settle down in Danville, Pennsylvania for their new home. “Property, good solid property, the bountifulness of life” (300) are what the first Macon Dead loves. Being a descendant of slaves and a born slave himself, Macon Dead seeks what his father and himself are deprived of—property, especially good solid property. It takes Macon Dead sixteen years to get the farm, the beautiful Lincoln’s Heaven, and own his property. Losing his parents, family and everything since a baby, Macon Dead works hard to be prosperous by owning properties. He speaks to other blacks:

See? See what you can do? Never mind you can’t tell one letter from another, never mind you born a slave, never mind your daddy dead, never mind nothing. Here, this here, is what a man can do if he puts his mind to it and his back in to. Stop sniveling...We live here. On this planet, in this nation, in this country right here. Nowhere else! We got a home in this rock, don’t you see! Nobody starving in my home; nobody crying in my home, and if I got a home you got one
Macon’s sermon here, though encouraging to the ex-slaves, reveals the traumatic effects of being abandoned by his own father. He stresses that “never mind your daddy dead…we live here…in this country right here. Nowhere else!” Macon’s insistence on getting “a home in this rock” and “Nowhere else” displays his pain of paternal loss and manifests his contradictory choice of seeking a home in this country other than his father Solomon’s choice of Africa. If home is defined as where one’s sense of belonging is settled and where one feels secure, accepted and protected, then Solomon’s home is located in the other continent, in his homeland Africa, while Macon’s home and sense of identity are rooted in the land of this country. For Macon, the land is the solid property for which he claims and makes it his own. He encourages the ex-slaves to “grab this land” since it is the foundation which one can “own,” “build,” “multiply,” and “pass on.” The land and its property become Macon’s aim of owning an ideal home. However, it is precisely because of his owning the property, the farm that gets him the target of envy, and he “died protecting his property” (51).

Macon’s death marks a traumatic incident to the community people for it “Upset a lot of people here, a whole lot of people. Scared ‘em too” (230). The whole community goes through the traumatic loss of their loved and respected one and begins to suffer a spiritual death. His death is “the beginning of their own dying even though they were young boys at the time” (235). Macon’s death is like part of them is dying because they identify with him and look up to him as a capable and successful farmer. The helplessness and hopelessness they feel about the death of a righteous and industrious African American man, who signifies to them the possibility of obtaining prosperity and dignity, initiate their dying for there is “nothing to do. White folks didn’t care, colored folks didn’t dare” (232). These old friends begin to die when they see what has happened to a black man like them because the killing could happen to anyone. The whole community suffers a sense of guilt and shame, feelings of loss, humiliation, hopelessness and frustration. They mourn over Macon’s death and are thankful that the children escape.

While the community endures the loss of a respected person, it is harder for Macon’s
two children to confront his death. The second Macon Dead loves his father. He is so proud that he “worked right alongside my father. Right alongside him” (51) since the age of four. In the reminiscence of his father, the second Macon is full of respect and affection toward him. He tells Milkman how he and his father “hitch President Lincoln to the plow” (51), how his father has etched in his mind certain historical figures and the beauty of the farm that belongs to his father and, in extension, to him. The memory of his father and the farm is vivid in his mind: “every detail of that land was clear in his mind” (52). Milkman later comes to know that the second Macon Dead “loved his father; had an intimate relationship with him; that his father loved him, trusted him, and found him worthy of working ‘right alongside’ him” (234). Therefore, when Macon sees the man he loves, respects and identifies with falls off the fence, “The numbness that had settled on him…something wild ran through him” (50-51). As Circe says of Macon, “It’s hard enough with a murdered father” (245).

The cave scene serves an important incident in the second Macon’s change after his father’s death. After Macon and Pilate leaves Circe, the ghost of a man who looks like their father first appears to them and motions them to get into a cave. The old white man who sleeps in the cave reminds Macon of “how his father’s body had twitched and danced for whole minutes in the dirt” (169). The anger toward the white Butlers is unconsciously shifted toward the innocent white man, and Macon kills him. With the bag of gold left by the white man, Macon is planning to get another farm just like his father’s: “Life, safety, and luxury fanned out before him like the tail—spread of a peacock” (170). The bag of gold thus becomes Macon’s compensation for paternal loss, and it signifies the family legacy that he rightfully inherits from his father since it is through his father’s guidance that they come to the cave. In the fight with Pilate who insists on leaving the bag of gold unmoved, Macon “loses” the gold that he thinks belonging to him. From that time on, Macon is obsessed with the retrieval of the bag of gold that he once had and then lost as it means so much to him. Even at the age of seventy—two, a very rich man, Macon still craves the bag of gold and urges his son to retrieve it for him at whatever cost.

The second Macon’s grievance against society for causing his father’s death is vividly seen when he complained to Milkman that “Everything bad that ever happened to him happened because he couldn’t read” (53). Macon attributes his father’s death to his illiteracy and his inability to adapt to the dominant culture. Thus, Macon the second adapts the white bourgeois values and becomes more capitalist than the murderers Butlers. As what Guitar says of him, “He’ll reap the benefits of what we sow, and there’s nothing we can do about that. He behaves like a white man, thinks like a white man” (223). At age seventeen, after irreparably separated from his sister, Macon the second is “already pressing forward in his drive for wealth” (28). In ten years, he is “a colored man of property” (23), the owner of two rental shacks and marries the daughter of the richest Negro doctor in town.
Macon the second relentlessly seeks his bourgeois dream for “Money is freedom...The only real freedom there is” (163). Milkman later comes to understand that his father’s capitalist pursuit is the effect of his traumatic paternal loss:

And his father. An old man now, who acquired things and used people to acquire more things. As the son of Macon Dead the first, he paid homage to his own father’s life and death by loving what the father had loved: property, good solid property, the bountifulness of life. He loved these things to excess because he loved his father too excess. Owning, building, acquiring—that was his life, his future, his present, and all the history he knew. That he distorted life, bent it, for the sake of the gain, was a measure of his loss at his father’s death. (300)

Since there is no model for a healthy sense of identity and autonomy, the second Macon’s sense of belonging lies in owning properties because that is what his father has loved. Gary Storhoff argues that Macon’s “aggressive actions as an adult are paradoxically intended to establish himself as a replication of his own father...His father—identification, indeed, takes the form of reconstructing Lincoln’s Heaven...” (211). Like his father, Macon the second works hard to own properties and in his own way tries hard to get back what his father loses. He tells Milkman: “Let me tell you right now the most important thing you’ll ever need to know: Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you’ll own yourself and other people too” (55). For Macon the second, owning things enables him to own himself and other people as well. In “Knowing the Names,” Marianne Hirsch states that Macon Dead the second “believes, wrongly, that he inherited his material ambitions from his own father”, because while Macon Dead Sr. grew “real peaches,” Macon the second “grew other things” (76). Ownership and properties become the most important things in Macon’s life.

The paternal loss marks a traumatic incident in the second Macon’s life. It distorts not only his perceptions toward life but also his relationship with his sister and his people. After the father’s death, Macon the second becomes cold and stays dissociated from others. He turns from an affectionate and loving boy to a “stern, greedy, unloving man” (234). A “difficult man to approach—a hard man” and “a mind sharpened by hatred” (15), Macon feels that everyone wrongs him, even his sister. Macon used to carry his baby sister Pilate in his arms to the fields every morning and used to be so close to her and love her: “she and he were one” (147). Pilate was once “the dearest thing in the world to him” (20). However, because of the conflict in their quarrel over the bag of gold, he breaks away with his beloved sister and goes his own way. Unlike Pilate who goes south to seek their father’s people as they first agree, he is on his way to make money in this world and chooses to distance himself from his sister and his people. Macon the second looks at everything, even his sister, from the perspective of the white bourgeois. He tells Milkman: “Pilate can’t teach you a thing
you can use in this world” (55). When Pilate comes to the town to look for her brother, Macon treats her with an attitude that is extremely “truculent, inhospitable, embarrassed, and unforgiving” (151) and feels ashamed of her for she might “make him trashy in the eyes of the law—and the banks” (24). From his perspective, Pilate is an illegal bootlegger, useless, crazy, “odd, murky, and worst of all, unkempt,” “like common street women” (20). Macon is afraid and “trembled with the thought of the white men in the bank…discovering that this raggedy bootlegger was his sister” (20). Macon only sees himself and his benefits and remembers only her betrayal and his anger. He shows no affection to his sister who comes a long time to seek her kin. At the age of seventy-two, he is very rich but greedy and still craves the bag of gold that might hang in Pilate’s house. He takes pains to persuade his son to steal the bag of gold from his poor sister who lives a very simple life. The second Macon’s greediness and coldness make himself alienated from all his intimate relationships.

The second Macon’s coldness extends not only to his sister, but also to his own families. Milkman is caught in between family quarrels, not just those between his father and his aunt Pilate but also those between his father and his mother. Macon’s insensibility and repulsion to his wife Ruth and his periodical beating of her deprive her of his love and sexual gratification and drive her to seek comfort in sleeping by her father’s grave and nursing Milkman till he is eight years old. Susan Willis argues that “For Macon Dead, Milkman’s father, all human relationships have become fetishized by their being made equivalent to money. His wife is an acquisition; his son, an investment in the future; and his renters, dollar signs in the bank” (317). Ruth knows that her father’s money is more important to her husband. She uses their son Milkman as a platform of competition to win over her husband’s attention. Besides, Macon’s coldness offers little love to her two daughters, First Corinthians and Magdalena called Lena, who live under his control and manipulation and often do not know what to do with themselves. Macon’s presence at home makes each of his family “awkward with fear” (10). Throughout the novel, as a father figure, the second Macon’s rigidity and indifference is contrasted with the warmth and kindness of his deceased father. Being cold, unloving, selfish and imposing, Macon makes the family atmosphere extremely gloomy and depressing. As a typical nuclear patriarchal family, the Dead family is not a warm and loving family at all. Each of the family members lives in fear because of Macon. As Lena says to Milkman, “I didn’t go to college because of him. Because I was afraid of what he might do to Mama” (215). Macon’s selfishness and coldness not only drive his families away from him but also make their life miserable.

Macon the second responds to his father’s death by loving extremely what he loves and seeking exceedingly what he is deprived of. He becomes more and more self-centered and emotionally numb. The pursuit of properties and money becomes his only aim in life and his only interest. He is indifferent to anything other than owning properties. Living in a
well—to—do middle—class family, Milkman, the third Macon Dead, learns no other way except his father’s selfishness and indifference. While the Dead family suffer Macon’s presence at home, they also endure Milkman’s childishness and selfishness. Lena accuses Milkman of being a “baby brother” for whom “everything in this house stopped” (215). She says of him as being “exactly like him [his father]. Exactly” (215). Like his father, Milkman is emotionally unconnected with others. He is unconcerned of anything and uninterested in anything. After hearing respectively each of his parents’ versions of story about their past, which obviously does not match, Milkman feels curiously disassociated from and alienated from his parents’ past. The knowledge of their conflict and their traumatic past burdens him with incomprehensible hatred since there is nothing he wants to “inconvenient himself for” (107). A dependant man who avoids responsibility, Milkman feels he does not deserve the burden and responsibility of the “unwanted knowledge” his parents bring to him (120). Thinking of himself as a tool for his parents’ competition, Milkman feels himself being abused and used. Feeling no sympathy for either his mother or father and bewildered by the familial conflict between his parents, Milkman thinks only of himself and wants to escape from his parents’ past. The family quarrel drives him away from his family members and to hang around with his buddy Guitar.

Milkman cannot get himself interested in anything, either money or politics. As he often jokes with Guitar about his family name, the Dead family has been dead spiritually: “My name is Macon, remember? I’m already Dead” (118). Guitar is often irritated by his carelessness and non—seriousness and has accused him of “selfishness and indifference; told him he wasn’t serious, and didn’t have any fellow feeling—none whatsoever” (296). Milkman’s indifference to anything makes him suffer “Boredom...No activity seemed worth the doing, no conversation worth having” (90). He is not interested in money since “No one had ever denied him any, so it had no exotic attraction” (107). And politics especially bored him: “Politics...put him to sleep. He was bored. Everybody bored him. The city was boring. The racial problems that consumed Guitar were the most boring of all. He wondered what they would do if they didn’t have black and white problems to talk about” (107). While the other men in the barbershop are discussing keenly the murder of Emmett Till,3 Milkman finds himself totally unconcerned with and untouched by the incident.

3 In August, 1955, Emmett Till, an African-American teenager from Chicago, was brutally murdered during his visit to Mississippi. A few days after Till said “Bye, baby” to Carolyn Bryant, a white female clerk at Bryant’s Grocery, Till was kidnapped by Roy Bryant, Carolyn’s husband, and J.W. Milam, half brother of Roy, and later found dead in the Tallahatchie River. The two white male suspects, Bryant and Milam, were acquitted but later confessed their crime to the public. However, they were never indicted in their life for the murder of Emmett Till. This incident marks to be one of the key events that spur the Civil Rights Movement in America. For more information, please refer to <http://afroamhistory.about.com/od/emmetttill/a/emmetttill.htm>.
Living in a society where pervasive racism affects everyday lives, Milkman seems to absorb his parents’ indifference to racial discrimination and act as if it has nothing to do with him. He avoids direct confrontation with racial discrimination and lives totally in his own private sphere.

The deprivation of ethnic roots and cultural identity produces, in Fanon’s vivid phrase, “individuals without an anchor, without a horizon, colorless, stateless, rootless—a race of angels” (218). Milkman’s homelessness is partly due to his rootlessness. Since Macon the second abandons whatever black identity or heritage he has in pursuit of his capitalistic dream, Milkman knows nothing of his ancestral past and has no connection with any cultural or communal root. Unlike Pilate who goes south to look for her people, Macon migrates to Michigan to pursue wealth. Though living in the same city, Milkman knows he has an aunt and hears the story of his grandfather until he is twelve years old. Macon’s poor relationships with his families and his weak identification with his people have been passed to his son Milkman, who until his thirty-third year, lives a complacent, dependant and irresponsible middle-class life totally absorbed in his own world, unaware of the history of his family and his race and unconcerned with what happened in the society. Similarly, Macon and Pilate Dead themselves know nothing from their parents of the repressed family history. They only know that their parents come from south, somewhere in Virginia. They even think that their parents meet in a wagon going north. Since their mother Sing has severed her relationships with her family and her people and intends not to be found, she is also a woman who rejects her past. Macon the first remains silent about his family history and together with his wife leave his foster families and his people for good. Actually, ever since he is a baby, Jake, the later Macon Dead the first, has been deprived of familial and communal nurturing. Losing both his parents, he is reared in an Indian family. The rootlessness in the Dead family can be traced back to the experience of the ancestor Solomon, who is transported to America to be a slave, being uprooted of his ethnic roots and racial identity. The family trauma is rooted in the legacy of slavery which entails a family line of blacks sharing a profound discontinuity with the past and wandering homelessly and living distortedly in an unwelcoming nation.

4 Morrison in the novel Song of Solomon records pervasive racism that affects the everyday lives of characters in public facilities, transportation, employment and housing. In 1931, Mercy Hospital was not allowed to take in black patients. Ruth Foster’s admittance to the hospital was not a regular situation but a special case. In 1942, Reba went into Sears simply because there were only “two toilets downtown they let colored in” (46). During the Jim Crow era, mobility was also restricted because blacks were not allowed to ride some passenger trains because they “ain’t supposed to go nowhere” (145). Besides, there “Ain’t no law for no colored man” (82) and “ain’t even got an orphanage in Jacksonville where colored babies can go? They have to put ’em in jail” (109). The historical events mentioned in the novel, such as the murder of Emmit Till (80, 88, 111), the convicted murderer Winnie Ruth (99), the Montgomery bus boycott (104) and the sit-ins movement (109) all indicate racial problems storming at the time where Milkman lives.
As blacks are surrounded by the atmosphere of hostility and futility, their sense of belonging depends much upon how they interpret their collective trauma. In order to escape slavery, Solomon leaves his wife and twenty—one children and flies back to Africa, which he deems as his home. Being rejected and mistreated in America, Solomon would rather return to where he belongs. His sense of belonging lies in his homeland Africa. Jake, the son abandoned by Solomon, with his wife Sing, would like to wipe out the past for it is too traumatic. Leaving everything and the past behind, the first Macon Dead builds his home in this country. The trauma of paternal loss drives him to situate his sense of belonging in rooting himself in the land of this country, especially in the acquisition and accumulation of properties in this country rather than in Africa. He attempts to reverse the effects of his father’s abandonment by choosing his home here in this country and owning and building things in this land. However, the first Macon’s dream of owning properties and enjoying the bountifulness of life does not last long. He is shot five feet up into the air by a disgruntled white man in front of his children. The shock and unexpectedness of witnessing his own father’s death leaves the second Macon Dead perpetually in trauma. Owning, building and acquiring things become the sole goal of his life, and properties are where his heart belongs because “he distorted life...for the sake of gain” as “a measure of his loss at his father’s death” (300). The traumatic symptoms become etched into his psyche and become his character. Macon the second changes into a greedy, proud, unthankful, selfish, snobbish and indifferent man. When it comes to his son Milkman, he lives totally in his own world, unconcerned of anything and wandering homelessly and pointlessly. A family line of barrenness and futility is culminated in the fourth generation Milkman, who is surrounded by death wishes even before he was born. The cycle of the family trauma is passing on and on until Milkman completes his ethnic and spiritual journey and finds his position as a black man in the stream of historical trauma.

Milkman has lost his past, his heritage and his name. His aimlessness in life is connected to his namelessness. In the novel’s epigraph, Morrison writes: “The fathers may soar/And the children may know their names.” Morrison in the epigraph links knowing the names with knowing the fathers and therefore knowing the past and the origin. The epigraph brings forth the novel’s central themes and suggests a strong connection between them—familial relations, transmission, naming, flight, root, and knowledge. In an interview, Toni Morrison talks about the significance of naming: “A part of that had to do with cultural orphanage...If you come from Africa, your name is gone. It is particularly problematic because it is not just your name but your family, your tribe. When you die, how can you connect with your ancestors if you have lost your name? That’s a huge psychological scar” (LeClair 126). Thus, names become a connection between an individual and his/her family and community. Being transported from Africa, Solomon has lost his name, his family and his tribe. After the emancipation, his son Jake, the later Macon Dead the first, accepts the
mistaken name from a drunken Yankee in a Freedom’s Bureau because his wife Sing insists on keeping the name, saying “It was new and would wipe out the past” (54). The family name is doubly removed from its root. Losing the name entails the Dead family to lose its heritage, tradition, history and identity and constitutes a family line of cultural orphanage. The tradition becomes “dead,” as the new family name suggests. Milkman has to learn the meaning of his own name, his family name, his ancestral history and the names of things as to connect himself with the past—the familial, racial, and cultural past—and perceive the world as alive.

**Knowing the Names—Milkman’s Transformation**

By knowing the names, Milkman reclaims his ancestors’ heritage and inherits a legacy from his forefathers. In Milkman’s first stop Danville, Pittsburg, he learns of his father’s and his grandfather’s past. It is also the first time in his life Milkman comprehends what it means to have a people to belong to. It means links and connection. The people in Danville greet him and talk with awe and respect about his father and his grandfather. As Milkman listens to their past, the identification with and affection for their ancestors the communal people display in their talk also affect him, and feelings toward his ancestors that he seldom experiences begin to emerge. Milkman feels his own anger which he hasn’t had when he first heard about his grandfather’s death. Gradually, Milkman understands Guitar’s anger because he cannot help but keep on repeating Guitar’s words: “sometimes, though, you can do something” (233). Some kind of linkage with his ancestors and the community starts to take form in him. Milkman finds that he loves “the boy [the second Macon Dead] they described and loved that boy’s father” (234-35) and shares with them their respect for and pride in them. The communal people in Danville offer their best hospitality and assistance in giving information about his ancestral past, as they do fifty-six years ago in sheltering and helping Old Macon’s children. By the time Milkman gets to his next stop Shalimar, Virginia, “his morale had soared and he was beginning to enjoy the trip: his ability to get information and help from strangers, their attraction to him, their generosity…” Where he went, there wasn’t a white face around, and the Negroes were as pleasant, wide—spirited, and self—contained as could be” (260). No longer emotionally numb, Milkman begins to enjoy being with his black folks, get interested in things, and be willing to offer help and receive help from strangers. The southern hospitality and communal support make him high—spirited and feel more at home.

Wilfred D Samuels argues that Milkman’s journey to Danville and Shalimar “marks the point of his separation from the false community of the Deads and begins the rite of passage that will result in his incorporation into his ancestral community, allowing him to transcend his present fostered existence in a spiritual flight to self” (16). However, the growth into manhood needs to be tested through trials and difficulties. Taking the southern hospitality
for granted, Milkman encounters taunts and fights in Shalimar which he thinks to be his home, his original home. In the community of Shalimar, Milkman is still the ignorant city boy who though “as black as theirs” has “the heart of the white men” (266). Milkman’s snobbish behaviors, such as his bragging about wanting to buy another new car, his locking the car in front of them as if they are potential car thieves, and his refusal to know their names, irritate the men in the community who think he distrusts them and denies their manhood. Deprived of any privileges he has in Michigan, Milkman has to take off the old, indifferent, and uncaring self and learns to break class barriers and racial indifference. The bobcat hunt is Milkman’s rites of passage into adulthood and manhood. As he starts out for King Walker’s, Milkman finds that he is more independent: “he had stopped evading things, sliding through, over, and around difficulties. Before he had taken risks only with Guitar. Now he took them alone” (271). As he meditates on why the community people are so hostile to him, he comes to realize that he might not “deserve” to have what he has once taken for granted. Milkman notices his evident selfishness to his family and to Hagar: “Apparently he thought he deserved only to be loved—from a distance, though—and given what he wanted…Maybe all he was really saying was: I am not responsible for your pain; share your happiness with me but not your unhappiness” (277). While being alone and with “nothing here to help him,” “his self—the cocoon that was ‘personality’—gave way” (277). Gradually, he understands Guitar, knowing that “something had maimed him, scarred him…like his own father” (278), so that he distorts killing for love. Milkman begins to notice what other people think instead of thinking only of himself.

The talk with Susan Byrd prompts Milkman to think and feel more of what having people means. “It’s a sad thing…without any people to claim you” (291), Susan Byrd said. Leaving Susan’s house “feeling tired and off center” (292), Milkman perceives that his perfunctory remark on finding his people is wrong: “Ever since Danville, his interest in his own people, not just the ones he met, had been growing” (293). The newly emerged feeling of relatedness and connectedness gives Milkman a new sense of belonging and enables him to understand his family members better. He is homesick for Pilate and for his mother. He begins to perceive his parental conflict with a new understanding. He understands his mother’s pain and his father’s trauma now. Hating his parents and his sisters seems silly now, and Milkman starts to pay attention to others’ feeling. He understands that he has used Hagar’s love for his own good to make himself a star. He sees his selfishness and his vanity.

Milkman’s reflection on himself opens his heart and augments his understanding of the folk song that the children in Shalimar sing in a game. At the time, Milkman has cultivated his ability in gathering information, interpreting the signs in the world and putting them all together. The folk song mythologizes Milkman’s ancestral past, a traumatic history of Solomon’s family. By knowing the names, Milkman is linked with the past of his people and reclaims his familial and cultural heritage. He recognizes that “Names that bore
witness” (330).

Under the recorded names were other names...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. Like the street he lived on, recorded as Mains Avenue, but called No Doctor Street by the Negroes in memory of his grandfather, who was the first colored man of consequence in that city...So they named a street after him. Pilate had taken a rock from every state she had lived in—because she had lived there. And having lived there, it was hers—and his, and his father’s, his grandfather’s, his grandmother’s. (329)

Names testify to memory in creating a chain of traditions passing on from one generation to another. The knowledge of his familial past enables Milkman to identify with his ancestors and their cultural heritages, which are composed of folk stories, legends, myths, biblical stories, and individual and collective memory. In other words, Milkman’s identification with his ancestors includes the identification with the cultural heritages they pass on. The connection with his ancestors, his people and the community elates Milkman, and he feels so proud of his ancestors: “He could fly...My great—grandfather could fly...could fly! He didn’t need no airplane...He could fly his own self!...my great—granddaddy could fly and the whole damn town is named after him” (328). By knowing the meanings of his ancestors’ names, Milkman knows who he is. The familial, cultural and historical understanding of the past and his pride in his ancestors enable Milkman to identify himself as a member of the Dead family, an heir of black traditions and an African-American man. No longer disengaged and indifferent and no longer nameless and rootless, Milkman knows who he is as the significance of the “Dead” name is unveiled to him.

The power of knowledge heals or transforms a person. Milkman’s knowledge of his ancestral history alters his relationship to himself, his family and his history, and the knowledge also helps the town people in Shalimar, his own father Macon Dead, and Pilate to work through their trauma. Earlier in Danville, the knowledge of the second Macon’s success comforts the community people and stops their symbolic dying: “Some word from him that would rekindle the dream and stop the death they were dying” (236). As the Old Macon’s death is also their death, now they share delightedly his son’s success. They shout with joy: “That’s him! That’s Old Macon Dead’s boy, all right!” (236). The community experiences a collective working—through by knowing the second Macon’s prosperity. Milkman later thinks of the hungry eyes of the old men whose “eagerness for some word of defiant success accomplished by the son of Macon Dead” (250). When Milkman returns home, the news of how the “boys” in Danville remember the Old Macon’s son and how the place Shalimar is named for his people transform Macon the second. For the first time in
his life, Macon Dead is willing to put down his work and “Let Freddie pick up the rents” for he wants to go by Danville and see “some of those boys before these legs stop[ped] moving” (334). He is willing to step out to re-connect with his people. Besides, Milkman brings news that consoles Pilate. The knowledge that Pilate is carrying her father’s bones comforts her. The understanding of her father’s trauma and history motivates her to bury her father to where he belongs. The knowledge of the past changes Macon and Milkman’s memory of the incidents and helps them to re-connect with the past and work through their trauma.

Milkman’s growth into adulthood and manhood requires him to confront and then resolve the conflict between personal freedom and familial responsibilities. While the whole town of Shalimar celebrates the brave acts of the Flying African, it is also traumatic for those who are left behind. In an interview with Mel Watkins, Morrison mentions the Ulysses theme, black men’s leaving home: “black men travel, they split, they get on trains, they walk, they move…It’s part of black life, a positive, majestic thing, but there is a price to pay—the price is the children. The fathers may soar, they may triumph, they may leave, but the children know who they are; they remember it, sing about it, mythologize it, make it a part of their family history” (46). Once Milkman becomes aware of the parallel between Solomon’s abandonment of Ryna and his twenty—one children and his desertion of Hagar, he begins to ponder the sorrow of those who are left behind. While it is spiritually elating for men to find freedom and adventures, the consequence of men’s leaving home are emotionally devastating for the family members they leave behind.

Pilate/Pilot the Mentor

In the novel Song of Solomon, both paternal and maternal legacies are important in the constitution of Milkman’s identity and manhood. Hirsch argues that Song of Solomon “radically rethinks familial relations and the process of familial transmission…and explores the viability of a dual masculine—feminine legacy” (73). If Milkman’s journey to the South is his destined quest for his subjectivity and manhood, then Pilate, the larger—than—life character in the novel, prepares him for this transformation, and her influence is ever—present in his quest. Milkman initially sets out to retrieve Pilate’s inheritance—her gold—but he ends up finding more valuable heritages that bag of gold embodies—spiritual, cultural and ancestral wealth. He follows Pilate’s routes of “looking for her people” (146) and unexpectedly re-connects himself with his people, his paternal ancestors, the communities, black cultural traditions and their past. Pilate is “the woman who had as much to do with his future as she had his past” (36). She is Milkman’s spiritual mentor who guides him and supports him.

In “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” Morrison mentions the founding role their ancestors play in rooting and shaping the tradition of Black literature: “There is always
an elder there. And these ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom” (343). Pilate and Baby Suggs in *Beloved* are both this kind of timeless ancestors who offer instruction and protection to the younger generation. Like her namesake, Pilate is a nurturing and protective ancestor whose name comes from the Bible, as a result of a random selection by Macon the first, who was then devastated by the death of his beloved wife in giving birth to Pilate. Macon chooses to name his baby daughter Pilate simply because the letters, Pilate, “seemed to him [Macon the first] strong and handsome”, and he “saw in them a large figure that looked like a tree hanging in some princely but protective way to over a row of smaller trees” (18). Pilate’s name carries her father’s expectation of her to be a woman who takes cares of the younger generations. Her name suggests her role as pilot and mentor to the young black.

Pilate embodies what, to Milkman, home represents. His first visit to her house at age twelve is “the first time in his life that he remembered being completely happy” (47). His sense of connectedness that he feels at Pilate’s house comes back to him again in his visits to Danville and Shalimar. It is also at Pilate’s house that Milkman starts being so possessive about his name as “a matter of deep personal pride” (38). Pilate loves him and “accepted him without question and with all the ease in the world. They [Pilate and Reba] took him seriously too” (79). From Pilate, Milkman feels the comfortable and confirmed love of a mother. There are always “achieved comfort,” “peace,” “energy,” and “singing” at Pilate’s house (301). Under Pilate’s influence, shame floods Milkman when he does something wrong. After Milkman steals Pilate’s bag of skeleton which he and his father both thought to be gold, shame sticks to his skin for he sees that Pilate is “both adept at it and willing to do it—for him” (25), to bail him out and rescue him. Pilate responds to Milkman’s stealing with love and forgiveness. Shame later also returns when Milkman recognizes his silliness in hating his parents and sisters and his selfishness in using Hagar. Under Pilate’s influence, Milkman cultivates his sense of connection with people, his understanding of people and his ability in loving people.

In an interview with Charles Ruas, Morrison claims: “Milkman is in a male, macho world and can’t fly, isn’t human, isn’t complete until he realizes the impact that women have made on his life. It’s really a balance between classical male and female forces that produces, perhaps a kind of complete person” (107). The maternal love Milkman receives from Pilate enables him to appreciate the women around him. However, it is until Milkman meets Sweet that he is ready for a reciprocal interaction. Doretha Drummond Mbalia argues that “It is not until Milkman has stripped himself of the ruling class’s views of race (interracial, in this case) and class superiority that he is able to see women as equals” (135). In other words, Milkman has to take off his class and male superiority before he allows female impact on him. In the bathing scene, Milkman rinses away not only his weariness
but also the skim of shame and his selfishness. Milkman learns the happiness of reciprocal love. All these experiences prepare for his later epiphanies to understand the people around him. He comes to see the impacts the women around him have made in his life. He understands Ruth’s “confirmed, eternal love of him” (79), Pilate’s willingness to love, Hagar’s passionate love for him, his sisters’ care for him, and Circe’s guidance in his life.

Milkman learns from Pilate a willingness to love and to give. Pilate is a life—ensuring mother for Milkman and guides him to turn from a dependent/milk man to a nurturing/milk man. At the end of the novel, even as she is dying, Pilate keeps on saying: “I wish I’d a knowed more people. I would of loved ‘em all” (336). At her death, Milkman understands why he loves her so: “Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly. ‘There must be another one like you,’ he whispered to her” (336). Pilate’s selfless love gives the act of flight a new dimension, contrasted with the individualist pursuit of freedom in Milkman’s paternal ancestor, Solomon. Throughout his life, Milkman has an inexplicable fascination with flight. It is until his final leap into the air that flight takes its deeper meaning. The final leap, according to Morrison’s interpretation, is “out of a commitment and love and selflessness” since “they are willing to risk the one thing that we have, life” (Ruas 111). Milkman stands up and is willing to risk his life for the killing arms of his brother. Guitar puts down his gun and looks at Milkman with his new eyes and says, “My man, my main man” (337). Gurleen Grewal interprets the final leap as an act of redemption. Milkman’s flying leap responds to “the ideal vision of a black fraternity on love and service, united and secured in the knowledge of their history” that the epilogue of novel is dedicated (75). Unlike Guitar who distorts love for killing, Milkman’s sacrificial and selfless love in the flying leap redefines his black manhood which is different from his inherited one and is far from being irresponsible and selfish. If Solomon’s flight is both heroic and evasive, then Milkman’s flight is nurturing and willing to sacrifice for the love of other people. His flying leap is a flight toward the love of his brother, his community and his race.

Through Milkman’s quest for the meaning of blackness, Morrison imagines the genealogy of the Dead family whose trauma is rooted in slavery and racism. The trauma of paternal loss distorts the Dead men to seek their own interpretations of home and find where their sense of belongings lies. The family trauma is transmitted transgenerationally until it comes to Milkman who becomes a man without a past, without roots, without names and without traditions. Milkman’s journey south not only unravels his repressed familial and ancestral history but also helps him to understand the trauma of each generation of his ancestors and how they react to their trauma. Milkman’s quest for his roots and subjectivity represents a quest every black has to get through in order to reclaim his/her heritages and obtain his/her subjectivity. The making of black American manhood is constituted through the acceptance of the traumatic ancestral memory and a deep connectedness with one’s family, race and community. By claiming the paternal and maternal legacies and linking himself to the community, Milkman inserts himself into the stream of historical trauma and redefines his manhood.
(This paper is the revised version of one of the chapters in my dissertation. The original title in my dissertation is “Postmemory and the Crisis of Fatherhood in *Song of Solomon*.”)

**Works Cited**


