

Pilate's Representations as a Ship and Safe Harbor in Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon

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Abstract: *Toni Morrison creates her own picture about the Afro-American women inside her novels. She writes about the survival of her female characters in a society suffers from racism between both black and white people. She insists on encompassing the African American women's conflicts in their way of searching for self-esteem and self-reliance. She writes about the struggles facing her women characters and how they improve themselves in order to overcome the obstacles they face. Pilate the female protagonist serves as the moral guide of the novel. Pilate is a strong independent woman. She chooses her own paths in life away from the patriarchal society. Pilate helps every character in the novel emotionally, mentally and financially. She helps Ruth in facing her Husband. She helps Milkman in finding his own self. She protects her daughter and granddaughter and supports them financially. In helping all these characters, Pilate is ship that leads them to the shore and the harbor where everyone feels safe from the waves of life.*

Keywords: Toni Morrison, Afro-American, Racism, Struggle, Pilate

1. Introduction

Toni Morrison affirms that "black women are both ship and safe harbor" (Taylor-Guthrie, p. xii). Maya Angelou in her interview with Bill Moyers (1973) affirms that "There is a kind of strength that is almost frightening in black women. It's as if a steel rod runs right through the head down to the feet." (p.21). Pilate is both strong and a masculine independent woman. She chooses her own paths in life away from the patriarchal society. Harold Bloom affirms that Pilate has her own free thinking about how she wants to live her life when he states that "She is a strong and independent woman who makes her own ways in life. She is an extraordinary woman who makes living in itself an art" (Bloom,2007,p.11-12).

Pilate the Natural Healer

Pilate helps Milkman dead in his spiritual journey to discover his real self. Milkman finds himself in front of two different values. The values of his father Macon dead II which leads him to be alienated from both himself and his black community. Macon dead II tells Milkman "Own things. And let the things you own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too" (Morrison's Song of Solomon, p.55). Susan Willis (1982) states that Macon dead II is "more white than black"(p.34). The values of his aunt Pilate are different from his father's values since she focuses on both her family legacy and the history of the black community. Andrea O'Reilly describes Pilate as "a woman who fully and completely embraces the ancestral memory, ancient properties, and funk of the mother line" (O'Reilly, 1996, p.80).

According to Morrison, Pilate is a "natural healer" (Morrison's Song of Solomon, p.150). She is old, wise, strong and protective for all those who around her. Holloway and Demetrakopoulos (1997) comment on such characters in Morrison's novels by stating that such old women have a will to survive and this will is magical because they are representing both wisdom and the

mythology of Africa. These women are magical because that Morrison gives them physical qualities that ensure their survival and by that they keep the existence of the black community (p.178).Wilfred D. Samuel states that Pilate's power and sensitivity makes her above others. She is just like a tree grounded with principles of her own. She protects those who need her protection not only through her six feet high but through her love and wisdom (Bloom, 2007, p. 27-28).

In order to support her daughter and granddaughter, Pilate starts a bootlegging business. The absence of a husband or a man makes her the breadwinner of the family. She is both a helper and protector for all her relatives. She helps Ruth getting pregnant from Macon by giving her some herbal treatment. The herbal treatment works and Ruth succeeds in having a baby. Pilate gave Ruth a "nasty greenish-gray powder" (Morrison's Song of Solomon, p.131) to add it into Macon's food. When Macon knows about Ruth's pregnancy, he hits Ruth's stomach trying to "get her to abort" (Morrison's Song of Solomon, p.131). Ruth asks Pilate to help her keeping the baby and Pilate plays the role of the healer and the protector to Ruth:

Pilate comforted Ruth, gave her a peach She listened to what Ruth said and sent Reba to the store for a box of Argo cornstarch. She sprinkled a little of it into her hand and offered it to Ruth, who obediently took a lump and put it in her mouth. As soon as she tasted it, felt its crunchiness, she asked for more. (Morrison's Song of Solomon, pp.131-132)

Through that, Pilate helps Ruth in keeping the baby and stops Macon from abusing Ruth and she is successful in that since "he left Ruth alone after that" (Morrison's Song of Solomon, p132).

Pilate and Ruth are opposite female characters. Mary Aswell Doll (2000)comments on Morrison duel characters and

states that opposite characters can help each other's to find what may they lack in them by bringing new experiences to achieve self-actualization and learning (Doll, p.184). Ruth admits that Pilate saved both her life and her son's life. Ruth tells Milkman that "Pilate helped me stand him off. I wouldn't have been strong enough without her. She saved my life. And yours, Macon. She saved yours too" (Morrison's Song of Solomon, pp125-126). Pilate plays the role of the savior and the moral guide to Milkman dead.

In his first interaction with his aunt, Milkman is completely shocked by her situation. He finds a strong, masculine self-sufficient woman as he further describes:

this woman was definitely not drunk. Of course she was anything but pretty, yet he knew he could have watched her all day... And when she stood up, he all but gasped. She was as tall as his father, head and shoulders taller than himself. (Morrison's Song of Solomon, pp.73-74).

Ruth describes Pilate's house as haven for those who are in need. It is a safe place for those who need help and guide. She states that "this house had been a haven then, and in spite of the cold anger she felt now, it still looked like an inn, a safe harbor" (Morrison's Song of Solomon, p.135). In Pilate's house, and for the first time, Milkman is completely happy. Morrison describes his situation by stating that "He was sitting comfortably in the notorious wine house; he was surrounded by women who seemed to enjoy him and who laughed out loud"(Morrison's Song of Solomon, p.89). Susan Willis (1991) describes Pilate's house as a utopia while Ruth's house as a dystopia when she states "In Song of Solomon the three-woman household finds its utopian realization in Pilate's house"(p.211).

Pilate house is a refuge for all people even those who deny her. Macon in one night, comes secretly to her house to listen to her singing with Reba and Hagar. Pilate values African-American traditions and consider them as a source for her strength and unlimited love. By singing traditional songs, she feels that she is free from oppression. Morrison describes Macon's situation while listening to the folk songs and says:

Near the window, hidden by the dark, he felt the irritability of the day drain from him and relished the effortless beauty of the women singing in the candlelight...He knew her face better than he knew his own. Singing now, her face would be a mask; all emotion and passion would have left her features and entered her voice... As Macon felt himself softening under the weight of memory and music, the song died down.(Morrison's Song of Solomon, p.60).

Pilate tells Milkman about the stories of his ancestors. She plays the role of the spiritual guide to him. By passing him her wisdom and knowledge through stories and songs, Milkman starts searching for his roots which will lead him to self-knowledge. Milkman starts searching about his ancestors town by travelling to different places like Danville and Virginia the home of his ancestors. In his journey,

Milkman faces many problems and threats especially from his old friend Guitar. Guitar wants to kill Milkman by shooting him with a bullet but it hits Pilate. Even in her last moments of life, Pilate serves as a protector and savor for her family. For now, Milkman knows that Pilate is the only person he knows who can fly without departing the ground. Morrison states that "For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it." (Morrison's Song of Solomon, p.337).

2. Conclusion

Pilate is an incredible woman. From the very begging of her life, she forces herself out of her dead mother's womb. She is both protective and healer. When a man tries to assault her daughter, she carries a knife and threaten the man by pointing it to his heart "I'm not going to stick it in any deeper. Cause if I stick it in any deeper, it'll go straight through your heart" (Morrison's Song of Solomon, p.93). She protects Ruth and her child from Macon. She is vital and wanderer who gains her wisdom through journeys. She is a self-sufficient woman who has her own values. She achieves her independency by having her own house and her own philosophy. She takes a surprising role through saving the legacy of her family by helping Ruth having a son and helping the son to learn the heritage of the ancestors. Patrick Bryce Bjork states that "Pilate's story indicates that she possesses the essences of the existential hero" (Bloom, 2007, p.45). Pilate directs almost every character in the novel in their journey of emancipation. Although the novel focuses on the quest of the male protagonist Milkman Dead and his spiritual journey for the self, the novel affirms on Pilate's role as a hero through protecting and saving her relatives in a harming society.

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