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RECONQUEST OF THE PAST IN “SONG OF SOLOMON” BY T.
MORRISON

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Abstract

This article deals with the problems of interpretation of the most widely acclaimed novel by T. Morrison “Song of Solomon”. The actions of the characters in this novel, namely Macon Dead Sr, Milkman Dead, Robert Smith and Guitar Bains are seemingly senseless. They are looking for treasure, but never find it. They ignore people who love them, but suffer when they die. They kill themselves by trying to fly with fake wings. They take a revenge on innocent people that they hardly know. All these characters are craving for freedom, each in his own way, but to gain freedom they need to find a way to deal with the trauma of slavery. They attempt to forget the past by accepting the fake version of it, but it takes them nowhere, because fake past soon results in losing the self-identity. It becomes apparent that the attitude to the personal, family and national past determines human being as a personality. The author’s attitude to the past is metaphorically described as finding a treasure. Those characters that reject their past seem to be less sure about their future and tend to make wrong ethical choice. Generally, deprived of his past, a person becomes deprived of some collective unconscious that can guide him through the uncertainty of today into the confidence of tomorrow.

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1. Introduction

The novel *Song of Solomon* by Morrison is so extremely well known that it's fairly pointless to discuss it in traditional terms. So, may we offer just another angle of view on the book that has been a bestseller for decades by now. This book was very well received by a Russian reader. It keeps being republished nearly every year by the federal publishing houses and still remains successful in terms of sales. But ultimately, what does a Russian reader find in the book that describes the reality so far from his own? Most probably, this book remains interesting for every new generation of Russian readers, since it has some themes that are not uncommon to Russian culture. Such as the themes of the past and the truth of the past, the place of an individual in history, and the theme of human dignity in its relation to nationality and ethnicity.

2. Problem Statement

Being a popular object of research for decades, this book was analyzed in terms of the aspects of mythos used in the narration, and in terms of Faulknerian intertext and still the problem remains. The characters of this book live in the reality they dislike with the past that is partly fake. They suffer from alienation and the lack of motivation, but can't find the root of their problems. So, it's quite important to find, if there is any connection between the personal problems of the characters and their attitude to the past.

3. Research Questions

The image of flight in the novel is a very important metaphor. It is quite clear that the flight is strongly connected with freedom. But taking into consideration the importance of the attitude of the characters to their own past, it is crucial to find the answer, what is the connection between the personal freedom and the attitude to the past in the ethical paradigm of this novel.

4. Purpose of the Study

By answering these few questions, we are trying to bridge the gap in the tradition of the interpretation of this novel, where the past and the freedom are regarded as separate themes. And possibly form a new perception of this novel where the freedom and the past are seen and interpreted in the same dimension.

5. Research Methods

For achieving the goals of our research, we are using a combination of motif analysis and hermeneutical method of text interpretation.

There is certain difference in perception of the novel *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison in Russian and American critical tradition. And though the schools of literary criticism are becoming more global, still within the last few years, the angle of research and specific problems, raised by researchers remained quite different. Russian criticism preserved its traditional attitude to the text and stated very general questions, trying to put this novel into a larger context or literary tradition. It was also quite obvious that all Russian

researchers tried to find some typological conclusions. Looking at the text they carefully maintained the view that is larger than the text itself.

Attempts were made to find the source of influence on Morrison's prose among some influential American authors of the 20th century. Dolgieva (2018) is finding some common themes in the novels by Morrison and Faulkner. This comparison seems to be quite logical since there are many similarities between the texts of those two authors. It starts with the fact that both Faulkner and Morrison chose as setting for their novels some imaginary city, but goes far beyond this. Dolgieva (2018) finds many common traits of the texts of Faulkner and Morrison, especially where the inner emotional space of the family and the motherly role of a woman are concerned.

In her other work, Dolgieva (2016) is comparing the images of the main characters in the novels by Toni Morrison and Alice Walker. She comes up with a conclusion that the texts of Morrison are less feminist than those of Walker. Since the female characters don't always take the leading position, are less active and tend to compromise injustice in the society and in the family.

Another approach is offered in the article by Belyayeva and Vetoshkina (2016). They look for the major motifs in the novels *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* by Morrison (Belyayeva & Vetoshkina, 2016). It is stated that both novels use the antagonism of the two basic motifs, freedom and slavery. Besides that, authors find many meaningful biblical allusions that are used to portray the characters.

Quite an interesting angle of research is offered by Nadirova (2019). She is pointing out the theme of looking for Afro-American identity that is very typical for the works of Morrison (Nadirova, 2019). Analyzing the main ideas of the novel *Jazz* by Morrison, Nadirova (2019) comes to a conclusion that the actions of the main characters of this novel are motivated by an attempt to overcome the trauma of the racist attitude and looking for self-identity.

Attributing the texts of Morrison to some particular tradition is one of the main problems in the study by Maslova (2011). She is analyzing the novel *Tar Baby* in terms of its relation to Magic realism (Maslova, 2011). The author points out that the Magic realism as a form of narration expands the descriptive possibilities and helps to form new plot patterns for many African American writers.

Quite recently there was published another research by Mogish (2020), that studies the novel *Song of Solomon* as an attempt to use a myth as a descriptive device. The author sounds very convincing, stating that the myth of a flying man is a mean of expression for an individual and collective craving for freedom. These are just a few works, published in Russia in the last years, that study the novels by Morrison in terms of literary analysis. In fact, there are some other works, but these are most characteristic for understanding the contemporary trends of research.

As we compare the research trends in Russia and abroad, we can see that the object of inquiry is quite different. For the researchers outside Russia among the most widely discussed themes is the trauma of slavery and the influence of it on the generations of people that live today. This includes the influence on the attitude to property and ownership (Goldberg, 2016). And the trauma of shame and guilt as well as the feeling of homelessness (Visser, 2016) that is obviously the consequence of slavery.

Another theme that attracts researchers in the novels by T. Morrison is changing the attitude to the category of gender and shifting gender roles (Harack, 2016; Hathaway, 2019). An extremely interesting research was published by a group of scientists from Indonesia. They saw a certain connection between the

rise of national literature and social change (Azmi et al., 2018). A very profound research by Beavers is dedicated to the poetics of space and time in the novels by Morrison. It is very well stated in the research that the space dimensions can become an allegory of pain, fear or even arrested motion (Beavers, 2018).

Besides that, there are some highly individual researches that offer a new perspective that we were previously unaware of. The image of Pilate is compared to a witch in the research by Lopez Ramirez (2020). Phiri (2017) is offering a more profound analysis of black subjectivities. Yates-Richard (2016) is researching a very sensitive theme of maternal disavowal in black literature. Stave (2017) is dealing with the problem of masculine confirmation and coming out of age. So, the scope of research themes is very wide and still there are many more questions remaining that show quite vividly that research should carry on.

In the novel *Song of Solomon*, the time and space are very expressive. The first few abstracts of the novel represent a world where the true names of locations are altered by the conscience of the characters. Quite ironically, the plot starts in the street that is called Not Doctors Street, near a No Mercy Hospital. Macon Dead Sr has his office in a building that previously was a shop, so it still has that Sonny's Shop advertisement just above the entrance. But he never tries to change it: "Scraping the previous owner's name off was hardly worth the trouble since he couldn't scrape it from anybody's mind" (Morrison, 1987, p. 17).

It is important that everyone knows that Not Doctors Street has another name, but no one can remember it. Just as well as everyone knows that Sonny's Shop is not there anymore, but no one remembers who was Sonny anyway. And Everyone knows that the true name of the charity hospital is Mercy, but No Mercy describes it better, since black patients are not allowed there. The characters live in some kind of a parallel reality that looks fairly surreal.

Another important observation is that many of them have last names that conceal or fake the past of their family. For instance, Macon Dead knows that his last name is just a mistake, made during the census back in 1869. He could have changed it long ago, but he doesn't care. Another character, Guitar Bains, knows that his last name is the name of the slave owners who used to own his grandparents. But he still keeps it, to maintain the hatred towards white people: "I don't give a damn about names. <...> Besides, I do accept it. It's part of who I am. Guitar is my name. Bains is the slave master's name" (Morrison, 1987, p. 160).

It's quite clear that all characters try in their own way to silence the trauma of slavery. Some by sinking into apathy, some by giving in to their hatred, but neither succeed. In fact, many of them end up with some sort of massive indifference towards each other and even themselves. It becomes quite clear from the way Macon Dead Sr gives names to his daughters. In fact, it's not a human name, as such, that is chosen with love and care, but a random word from the Bible, that by all measures is a holy book, but it wasn't initially designed for giving names to babies. The names of his daughters are First Corinthians and Magdalene. Just as the name of their aunt Pilate, and another character called Empire State, they sound rather unusual, even grotesque.

Quite strangely many characters are presented somewhat incomplete. Macon Dead Sr is well off, but in many scenes, he is lacking some basic qualities. His relationship with Ruth, his wife, becomes cold and alienated, despite that previously they were very close and their marriage was quite happy. Macon Dead doesn't talk or meet with his sister, Pilate, since his son Milkman is born. When in the beginning of the

book the grandmother of Guitar Bains asks him to delay their rent, he proves to have a lack of sympathy. At all that he is not a little sociopathic, he just doesn't associate himself neither with his family nor with the society he lives in.

His son is heir to this kind of detachedness, but in another way. He doesn't want to take any trouble at all. He helps no one, he doesn't feel attached to anyone and he has no plans for future. His romantic relationship with Hagar, granddaughter of Pilate is burdensome for him, which is strange for a young man. As Harris puts it, "Warped values, inadequate character formation, and self-centeredness all define Milkman's incomplete vision of the world" (Harris, 2009, p.10).

A careful reader after a certain time feels that individual and social problems of these characters are rooted in their attitude to their past. They are ashamed of it and try to distance from it by accepting those false names, just as Milkman's grandmother does: "Mama liked it. Liked the name. Said it was new and would wipe out the past. Wipe it all out" (Morrison, 1987, p. 54). But by rejecting their true past they accept, in terms of Baudrillard, a simulacrum of their own history, the fake version of their true past, the only function of it is to cheat oneself into believing that they don't have a past.

But the side effect of it is tremendously harmful, since people start to lose their self-identity and quickly deteriorate into a self-hating mob, rather than a society. We can see that in lack of consideration for each other, in social stratification and especially in attempts to revenge the death of every black man by the death of randomly selected white man, regardless whether he is guilty or not. That kind of revenge is carried out by a fictional organization called Seven days. And we learn that Guitar Bains, Empire State and Robert Smith are members of this organization.

Quite sadly, the novel starts with the death of one of them, Robert Smith, who attempts to fly away from the top of No Mercy charity hospital, using wings, made of blue silk. It goes without saying that his flight is doomed and what was intended to be a delight becomes a catastrophe, for Robert Smith gets killed, falling down on the cobble stones. Since he is a member of the Seven days, we may see here a thinly veiled metaphor. These people take their revenge on innocent, thus choosing a false target. They try to heal their trauma by causing pain to others. And this is just as pointless as flying with fake wings.

In the second part of a book Morrison is trying to escape the vicious circle of running away from past into nowhere by offering a better way of reconciliation with characters' inner self. The protagonist of the novel, Milkman, sets off for a quest, looking for some treasure that his father saw when he was a child. He travels back to the place where his family was from. Finally, he gets no treasure, but figures out that bones in the sack of his aunt are the remnants of his grandfather. Now, if bones of dead people are called a treasure, then grave diggers must be very rich. The real worth of these remnants is not material or financial, the process of looking for treasure is a metaphor of regaining the past.

Then it makes sense why Guitar Bains tries to stop Milkman from getting this treasure. His philosophy is based on revenge to white people and victimizing his ancestors. He can't accept that his past maybe full of love and faithfulness and he can't let others do so. But still Milkman learns that his great grandfather Solomon wasn't a slave. He was a free man who married a free woman, so there is no shame or trauma in his past, there is nothing to conceal or to be ashamed of. And this gives Milkman the feeling of freedom that in the text of the novel is compared to a flight.

By regaining his true past the protagonist is finding his self-identity and his personality that was all scattered is now whole again. That's how Rico is stating it: "Be that as it may, my contention is that history and our relationship to it are instrumental in shaping our personal and collective identities" (Rico, 2019, p. 143).

6. Findings

In the novel *Song of Solomon* by Morrison the theme of the past is strongly connected with the themes of self-identity and inner freedom. There is a certain antagonism between the fake and the true past.

7. Conclusion

The main characters choose different attitudes to their own history. Some try to ignore it, to maintain the tranquility of their mind. But that brings alienation from each other and emotional isolation. Some try to reject their past, but that results in growing hatred causing deliberate harm to innocent. And finally, some find in their past the moments of love and dignity and as a result they discover and re-establish their better selves. From this book we learn a history we learn a story of a selfish boy that grew up into a man ready for endeavor and self-sacrifice. But we also find that learning a lesson from our past takes a great deal of intellectual and emotional effort and that only when you pass this way, you will know that it was all worth it.

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