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Reimagining the Narrative of Flying Africans: Morrison, Memory, and Myth in *Song of Solomon*

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Abstract

The given research studies the motif of flying Africans in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* using the folktale, *People Could Fly* by Virginia Hamilton as a reference narrative. The study explores Hall's concept of the positioning of identity along the axes of continuities and discontinuities to trace Milkman Dead's journey toward self-realization. The research argues that Morrison uses the traditional folktale of flying Americans, initially aimed at children, and revises it by embedding rudiments of cultural identity including memory, fantasy, and myth. Expanding the narrative of flying Africans, a story passed down through generations, Morrison places Milkman's identity within a larger cultural and historical context. The research further explores how a traditional folktale, originally intended for children, can contribute toward creating a shared history as well as highlighting the ruptures of the past. By reimagining and expanding upon Hamilton's tale, Morrison addresses its inherent ruptures and discontinuities, challenging the cohesive and singular history it once aimed to construct. The research argues that through the narrative complexity of a children's tale, Morrison offers a profound commentary on the construction of identity, showcasing how cultural narratives can be both unifying and divisive.

Keywords: Flying Africans Motif, Cultural Identity Construction, Folklore and Memory, Continuities and Discontinuities, Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon.

1. Introduction

"To save for our children and ourselves, something of value [must be produced] from our folktale... To forget our past is to no longer remember the word; it is to lose the sense of ourselves that we must have in order to progress" (Hamilton, 1987, p. 74)

Children's folktales are more than mere bedtime stories, they are, instead, vessels of cultural heritage and identity passed through generations. These tales are the amalgam of a glorious past, memories, and myths of ancient histories, wrapped in the simplicity of a narrative. The legend of flying Africans, retold by Virginia Hamilton in her short story *People Could Fly*, is one of these children's folktales that embodies a sense of resistance and reclamation of history by the enslaved Africans who, by recalling ancient magic, sprouted their wings and flew back to their homeland. The narrative provides a communal sense to the Black community ensuring a "shared history and ancestry in common (Hall, 1990). In this regard, Toni Morrison reimagines the children's folktale of flying Africans, embedding it with a layered narrative of memory, fantasy, and myth. In her novel, *Song of Solomon*, Morrison revives this children's folktale (Barnes and Barnes, 2009) and uses it to carefully craft her protagonist, Milkman Dead's journey of self-discovery. The given research explores how Morrison uses this children's folktale to position Milkman's identity along Stuart Hall's axis of continuity and discontinuity. The research explores the elements of memory, fantasy, and myth underpinned in the narrative of flying Africans, and investigates the evolution and reconfiguration of identity in the novel *Song of Solomon*.

The given research uses Virginia Hamilton's *People Could Fly* as a reference point to argue that Morrison employs the children's folktale of the flying Africans as a foundational

narrative to connect Milkman's identity to broader cultural and historical contexts while highlighting the personal and communal ruptures that shape his identity. Virginia Hamilton published her folktale collection *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales* in 1985, eight years after Morrison's *Song of Solomon* was published. However, Hamilton's tale is a simplistic version of the old folktale that was thoroughly employed by Morrison in her novel, thus serving as a reference point to study the complexities of children's folktale in *Song of Solomon*. Taking Hamilton's folktale version as the foundational narrative, this research delves into the complexities of memory, fantasy, and myth as the rudiments of cultural identity in *Song of Solomon*. The research argues that Morrison uses children's folktale of flying Africans to illustrate how these stories provide a framework for understanding and negotiating the complexities of identity.

In this regard, the research attempts to answer the following questions. First, how does Toni Morrison reinterpret and reimagine the traditional narrative of a children's tale of flying Africans as presented in Virginia Hamilton's *People Could Fly*? Secondly, in what ways does she use elements of memory, fantasy, and myth to challenge the cohesive singular history, traditionally constructed by African American folktales? By answering the given question, the research aims to study the positioning of Milkman Dead's identity along the axis of continuities and discontinuities, as proposed by Stuart Hall.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *Song of Solomon*

Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon* provides a complex layer of narrative techniques in a broad literary canon. It resists a singular interpretation, arguing for a multifaceted framework

to study the novel. In this regard, Cowart (1990) challenges the notion that the said novel should primarily be read based on racial themes. Instead, as Cowart argues, the novel stands as a testament to rich literary inspiration drawn from writers like James Joyce and William Faulkner. The research argues that Morrison adopts Joyce's central imagery of flight, and weaves the intricate web of myth and memory through the recurring motif. In Cowart's words, Joyce's myth of flight has an aesthetic appeal "but Morrison's myth of flight concerns not art but simply freedom" (1990, p. 93). Cowart further studies the theme of flight as a literal and metaphorical escape from the physical and psychological oppressions of slavery. In addition, the research further opines that Morrison takes notes from Faulkner's narrative style to construct the characters' journey "into a misty and potentially painful past" (1990, p. 91). Faulkner constructs identities by encounters with the "genealogical and cultural past" of characters, much like Morrison constructs the character of Milkman in *Song of Solomon*. The research also asserts that Morrison might have disapproved of the comparison, however, it allows for a richer interpretation of the novel by highlighting the universal themes of self-discovery and identity.

The concept of flight to Africa has historically been associated with evasion from slavery and oppression. According to Barnes and Barnes (2009), the motif of African flight was revived by Morrison in her novel *Song of Solomon* by inculcating it into the historical and feminist narrative of the novel. The research argues that the theme is deeply embedded in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, resurrecting "not only the forgotten myth of the flying African but also the African American motif of flight" in fiction (Barnes and Barnes, 2009, p. 68). The research argues that Morrison's revival of the motif became an impetus for the resurgence of the archetype as manifested in the African American drama *West* by Pearl Cleage. Fifteen years

into Morrison's *Song of Solomon,* Cleage actively employed the newly revived archetype of flight in his drama, adding another genre to the motif. Barnes and Barnes (2009) trace the motif of flight in female characters of the two literary writings, asserting the resurgence of the once dormant archetype, the African flight, in Cleage's *West.* The research argues, "Cleage revises *Song of Solomon* by bringing female flight to center stage; this she does not by referencing the folklore variant of the flying African woman, but Morrison's variants of the flying African myth in Song of Solomon" (Barnes, 2009, p. 74). Accordingly, the given research draws comparisons between children's tales of flying Africans in *People Could Fly* and *Song of Solomon,* tracing the complexities of identity.

Studying myth serves as a backdrop to understanding African American works of literature, particularly, Morrison's works. In the book *Toni Morrison Encyclopedia,* Beaulieu (2003) opines that myths work as a narrative to construct cultural identity in Morrison's novels, as observed in *Song of Solomon*, where Milkman's discovery about his ancestral heritage turns out to be the moment of epiphany which ultimately shape his character. In Beaulieu's words, "The act of flying [in *Song of Solomon*] is believed to result from a realization, often, of one's identity" (2003, p. 2). Morrison draws on the myth of flying Africans, a legend rooted in African folklore, meanwhile inculcating elements of magical realism in her novel. The recurring flight motif is employed by many African American writers to create a cultural memory by preserving the traditions and folklore of African Americans. As seen in Milkman's great-grandfather, Solomon's flight back to Africa symbolizes freedom from slavery and oppression. Beaulieu (2003) in Morrison's encyclopedia opines that Morrison showcases her characters' struggle between assimilating into the dominant cultures or remaining true to their African roots, as seen in Milkman's character. Moreover, Morrison uses the theme of "spiritual

continuum", another important motif from African folklore, between the dead ancestors and their living descendants to create magical realism in her stories. Morrison is referred to as a "literary elder" by Beaulieu, stating that she modifies the myth of communion with the ancestors into a literary device, thus, ensuring that the myth survives in African American literature. (Beaulieu, 2003, p. 4).

Morrison effectively combines contemporary localized events with universal themes by drawing on myths and legends, appealing to a wide range of audiences. According to Harris, Morrison uses myth as a narrative technique to construct her novels' plots, without turning them into pure fantasy or making overuse of literary allusions (1980, p. 69). By weaving myth into the fabric of her story, Morrison provides a wide framework that resonates across various cultures and temporal contexts. Harris explains how Morrison uses mythopoesis to shape her narrative, drawing on Mircea Eliade's definition of myth as a "sacred history" that explains the origins, destiny, and cultural concerns of a people. In the words of Harris, "In *Song of Solomon*, we have genuine mythopoesis, the mythic impulse shaped and translated into symbolic art… She does not simply rework archetypes but blends the natural with the supernatural and the historically factual with the fantastic" (1980, p. 70). In the character of Milkman Dead, readers find a clear pattern of mythic hero development which includes the stages of birth and youth, alienation, quest, confrontation, and reintegration. Harris claims that Milkman's journey resonates with the quests of mythic heroes including Achilles, Moses, and Beowulf (1980, p. 70). Harris rightly studies the novel as Morrison's literary genius as she draws inspiration from ancient folklore and myths, such as Icarus's myth and other ancient legends, to weave an intricate tale of mythic realism set in contemporary contexts. Harris concludes that the use of myth transforms the narrative from a simple tale of personal growth to the discovery of cultural

and ancestral heritage. Milkman's archetypal journey as a hero and the motif of flight provides a cohesive framework to enrich the narrative by providing a universal resonance to the readers. Through these techniques, Morrison crafts a story that is deeply personal and broadly communal, reflecting on the enduring power of myth.

2.2.People Could Fly

Folktales, according to Hamilton (1993), are not just remnants of the past, but narratives that continue to shape Black lives by reflecting African American experiences. Tales like *People Could Fly* are a form of resistance against the oppression of slavery. Hamilton writes, "Black folktales I believe allow us to share in the known, the remembered, and the imagined together as Americans sharing the same history (1993, 74). Hamilton emphasizes that folktales play a significant role in preserving cultural heritage and alternative histories. She identifies three essential elements in telling folktales which include, the known, the remembered, and the imagined. With these three elements, she retells the tales of the past, preserving the genre of folktales for children and future generations. Hamilton sees these folktales as an act of saving children from identity loss by giving them a common history along with connecting people and fostering a sense of community.

While numerous studies have explored the motif of flight in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, the current research focuses on the motif of flight as a re-imagination of a traditional folktale, drawing comparisons between the narratives of Hamilton and Morrison. In addition, the given research studies the shift in Milkman's identity, a transition rooted in folktale, as Morrison positions his identity along the axis of ruptures and discontinuities.

3. Theoretical Framework

The given research aims to investigate Stuart Hall's concept of "positioning" within cultural identity in Toni Morrison's seminal work, *The Song of Solomon*, while studying the narrative of flying Africans in Hamilton's *People Could Fly* as a reference text. In his essay *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*, Hall challenges the notion of identity as an inherent and static phenomenon that is resistant to change. Identity, according to Hall, is the process of "positioning" through which individuals locate themselves within historical narratives and cultural contexts amidst the interplays of four determinants including "memory, fantasy, narrative and myth" (Hall, 1990, p. 226). The dynamic operation of positioning is the direct result of the dialogic relationship between two vectors of identity: "the vector of similarity and continuity; and the vector of difference and rupture" (Hall, 1990, p. 226). Building upon Hall's concepts, the given research delves into the mechanisms of identity construction in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, arguing that Morrison weaves a complex, dynamic, and discontinuous web of identity formation that aligns with Hall's second axes of identity, axis of difference and rupture. Morrison through her equivocal and inconclusive aspects of characters' personalities in the said novel, puts ruptures in Black identity at the forefront.

The concept of positioning in cultural identity involves a dynamic process of identity formation that severs its ties from rigid narratives based on vectors of continuity. Instead, Hall defines identity to be the outcome of ruptures and discontinuity which thrives on the basis of differences through which individuals locate themselves within a cultural context. According to Hall, "Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a

positioning" (1990, p. 226). Positioning underscores the idea that identities are not pre-existing entities, instead, they are always in a process of formation through an individual's living experiences and ongoing interactions within cultural contexts. For Hall, this unsettling version of identity is mediated through positioning and repositioning, further highlighting the arbitrariness of Caribbean identity. The positioning is merely a temporary "cut" or a "stop" in the endless flow of cultural signification, that further allows "repositioning" as the social, political, and cultural contexts evolve. As Hall (1990) states, "Meaning continues to unfold" (p. 230), understanding identity is possible at only a specific moment as it is always a subject of change and reinterpretation. The processes of "positioning" and "repositioning" are reflected throughout the novel *Song of Solomon* as the characters struggle with new realities defined by their historical narratives, tales of lineage, and new positions of enunciation.

Hall (1990) gives four rudiments of the process of positioning and repositioning in the dynamic construction of cultural identity. These include memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth. According to Hall, the given four rudiments of positioning are the "points of identification or suture" that define the cuts and stops in the unending process of identity formation, ultimately shaping the identity in specific moments. Delving further into the ambiguity of Caribbean identity, Hall states that the memory of the Black culture is tainted with experience of slavery and oppression (p. 230). As reflected in the novel *Song of Solomon*, memory and narrative play both a direct and indirect role in the continuous identity dynamics alongside other rudiments including fantasy and myth. In Hall's view, narrative operates through memory working in the background (1990), playing an effective role in fluctuations of cultural identity. Where fantasy allows the formation of imaginative histories, envisioning an imaginative community that transcends beyond sites of repression, the narrative builds a history that enables individuals to

make sense of their subjective realities. Likewise, myth encapsulates core beliefs and values, working as a touchstone of cultural identity that embodies the ideals and struggles of a community in a symbolic framework. In this regard, the given research explores how narrative of flying Africans folktale works in the background of the other rudiments as cultural identity oscillates in Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon*.

The given research further delves into dialogism between axes of continuities and ruptures in the process of construction of cultural identity. Hall (1990) emphasizes the interaction between similarities and differences through connections with history along with subjective experiences that formulate unique cultural identities, differentiating between individuals in the same culture. In Hall's words, "Caribbean identities always have to be thought of in terms of the dialogic relationship between these two axes. The one gives us some grounding in, some continuity with, the past. The second reminds us that what we share is precisely the experience of a profound discontinuity" (1990, p. 227). The axes of continuity and ruptures are evident in Morrison's novel as the characters navigate their unalike versions of cultural identity, meanwhile converging at points of similarity.

Building upon the given concepts by Stuart Hall, the research explores shifts and ruptures in the construction of cultural identity in Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon* while tracing the process of positioning and repositioning within the cultural context. In addition, the research delves into how the rudiments of identity formation including memory, narrative, fantasy, and myth were used by Morrison to make a complex blend of cultural and historical identities in the said novel. Further, the research explores how Morrison uses the traditional narrative of children's tale, using Hamilton's version of the folktale, and create ruptures within the narrative through memory, myth, and fantasy. The researcher uses *Song of Solomon* by

Morrison and *People Could Fly* by Virginia Hamilton as primary texts of the study. Other books and scholarly publications are used as the secondary source for data analysis and argumentation.

4. Analysis

4.1. Narrative: A Catalyst for Identity Transformation

The folktale of flying Africans is a prime example of Ricoeur's idea that narratives address the human need to save the histories of the subjugated and defeated groups. Ricoeur states, "The whole history of suffering cries out for vengeance and calls for narrative" (2014, p. 75). For Hall, narratives are the hallmarks of an individual or a group's identity, stating that identities are the way we position ourselves within the narratives of the past (2014). The motif of flight in African literary texts, particularly, in children's songs and children's literature showcases how narratives can be the harbingers of alternative histories. McAdams and McLean (2013, p. 223) state that constructing an identity based on narrative allows individuals to reconstruct the past in a way that "provides a person's life with some degree of unity, purpose, and meaning". It can be argued that the flight motif as a narrative and its employment in children's tales provide unity and identity to the African culture, imbuing a sense of purpose through the continuities of a shared, glorious past. The narrative of flying Africans portrayed in Virginia Hamilton's *People Could Fly* is not merely portrayed as a fantasy or myth, but also as a historical juncture deemed untrue by the white masters. Hamilton writes, "The one called Master said it was a lie, a trick of the light… They say that the children of the ones who could not fly told their children. And now, me, I have told it to you" (1990, p. 3). However, where Hamilton's narrative appears more as an effort to introduce continuity within the ruptures of a

history of slavery and oppression, Morrison highlights ruptures and discontinuities as the identity of her protagonist evolves. Accordingly, set in the backdrop of Hamilton's narrative of flying Africans, Morrison blends this narrative of flying Africans with Hall's other rudiments of cultural identity including myth, fantasy, and memory to position Milkman Dead's identity along the axis of continuity and discontinuity. Toni Morrison employs children's tale of flying Africans as a background framework to construct the captivating tale of the novel Song of Solomon. A single children's folktale of Africans flying back to Africa to evade the oppressions of slavery resonates in each rudiment of the cultural identity. In *Song of Solomon*, an innocent children's song carries the secrets to Milkman's journey of self-realization. The children's song that Morrison uses to build Milkman's memory reads as:

"Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone

Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home". (Morrison, 1997, p. 325)

Rooted in the narrative of flying Africans, as evident in Virginia Hamilton's short story *The People Could Fly*, Morrison uses the four rudiments of cultural identity that shape the lives of the characters in the novel.

4.2. Employment of Memory to Build a Present and Future

Morrison uses memory as the foundation of personal and communal identity in *Song of Solomon*. Rooted in the narrative of flying Africans, as observed in Virginia Hamilton's short story *People Could Fly*, memory is the first stage in the production of cultural identity in *Song of Solomon*. Norton (1993) opines that memory is one of the most potent tools in the hands of the colonizers as they exile the colonizers from their history and past to mark their permanent dominance. Addressing the threat of communal amnesia among African Americans,

Hamilton writes in her folktale, "The slaves who could not fly told about the people who could fly to their children. When they were free. When they sat close before the fire in the free land, they told it. They did so love firelight and freedom, and tellin'. They say the children of the ones who could not fly told their children. And now, me, I have told it to you" (1993, p. 3). It can be argued that Morrison addresses this general amnesia by reinvigorating the legend of flying Africans in her novel *Song of Solomon*. The motif of flight is intricately linked to memory as the rudiment of cultural identity in *Song of Solomon.*

Hall (1990) opines that the African identities must be re-told through politics, memory, and desire (p. 232). Accordingly, Morrison builds the plot by identifying the ruptures in the memory of characters like Milkman. For example, Milkman as a child believed that people could fly, only to discover later that it was impossible. It can be argued that the desire to fly originates from his ancestral memory, rooted in the flight of his legendary great-grandfather, Solomon. It is the event of the revival of the memory through Circe and Susan Byrd's revelations that Milkman overcomes the communal and generational amnesia. When Milkman deciphers the children's song and realizes that he could not be mistaken, "these children were singing a story about his own people!" (65), gives Milkman a different positioning on the axes of identity. Deciphering the children's song and realizing that he indeed, belongs to the flying tribe of African Americans, Milkman uncovers the fragmented memories of his ancestral history, as the narrator states, "He couldn't be mistaken. These children were singing a story about his own people!" (Morrison, 1977, p. 325-326). The rediscovery of his family's history allows Milkman to establish a sense of continuity with his ancestors, providing a stable foundation for his identity. According to Middleton (1993), memory is a prerequisite to gaining ancestral knowledge and cultural wisdom in the novel *Song of Solomon*. For Milkman, the

children's song becomes a tool of memory reclamation and positing his identity across the axis of continuity. Upon learning about the flight of his great-grandfather and discovering the continuities of his identity, Milkman joyously exclaims,

> "He could fly! You hear me? My great-granddaddy could fly! Goddam!" He whipped the water with his fists, then jumped straight up as though he too could take off, and landed on his back and sank down, his mouth and eyes full of water. Up again. Still pounding, leaping, diving. "The son of a bitch could fly! You hear me, Sweet? That motherfucker could fly! Could fly! He didn't need no airplane. Didn't need no fuckin tee double you ay. He could fly his own self!" (Morrisom, 1977, p. 350).

The continuities in his ancestral roots, however, do not emerge without its discontinuities. According to Hall, the ruptures challenge the fixedness of identity and highlight its transformative nature. As Milkman uncovers the glorious and legendary historical roots of his family, he discovers the gruesome murder of his grandfather, Jake, and the eventual displacement of his family. According to Hall, "Difference persists - in and alongside continuity" (1990, p. 227) which for Hall is evident in the history of slavery, colonization, and forced transportation. As Milkman discovers that although his great grandfather, Solomon was the legend who flew back to Africa, he discovers that he was also the one to leave behind his wife Ryna and twenty-one children. Hall asserts, "In the history of the modern world, there are few more traumatic ruptures to match enforced separations from Africa" (p. 227). The traumatic memory is uncovered when Susan Byrd tells him, "He [Jack, Milkman's grandfather] was the only one Solomon tried to take with him... He lifted him up, but dropped him near the porch of the big house. That's where Heddy found him… He brushed too close to a tree and

the baby slipped out of his arms and fell through the branches to the ground. He was unconscious, but the trees saved him from dying" (Morrison, 1977, p. 345). The realization of separation and abandonment, alongside the memories of slavery, and oppression, create ruptures, positioning his cultural identity across the axis of discontinuity, thus, shaping Milkman's identity. Milkman's quest for his ancestral roots culminates in a dialogic existence of ruptures and continuities in his identity, positioning his cultural identity in a dialogic relation of continuities and discontinuities.

In a similar fashion, these ruptures are also observed in Hamilton's People Could Fly, when the flying Africans leave behind the slaves who could not fly. However, since Hamilton (1993) focuses on creating a shared history for African Americans, the continuities in the narrative appear more stark, unlike in *Song of Solomon*. It can, therefore, be argued that the narrative of flying Africans in Morrison's novel is not solely an attempt to highlight continuities in history by discovering a communal past. The narrative is rooted in the memory of slavery and oppression coupled with ruptures of abandonment and separation.

4.3. Fantasy and the Positioning of Cultural Identity

Fantasy is the second rudiment of cultural identity in Hall's viewpoint, serving as a point of identification or suture in the process of positioning. Morrison builds historical contexts in the novel *Song of Solomon*, by using fantasy as a potent tool. In the children's tale of the flight of Solomon, as echoed by Virginia Hamilton in *People Could Fly*, the authors create a fantasy imagined by the concept of flight. Fantasy is defined by Maria Nikolajeva (2003) in her famous work *From Archaic to Postmodern* as a combination of reality and magic by blending the dynamic interaction between the ordinary and extraordinary. This interaction

between reality and magic is evident in the legendary tale of flying Americans. Hamilton puts it as, “She flew clumsily at first, with the child now held tightly in her arms. She felt the magic, the African mystery. Say she rose just as free as a bird. As light as a feather” (1993, p. 2). The fantasy of Africans flying from plantations creates a historical context of slavery along with socio-political dimensions in this children’s tale.

In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison uses this narrative to create a fantasy that shapes Milkman’s identity across the axis of continuities and discontinuities. The intertwined nature of identity and fantasy are explained by Scott as,

> “Fantasy is the means by which real relations of identity between past and present are discovered and/or forged. Fantasy is more or less synonymous with imagination, and it is taken to be subject to rational, intentional control; one directs one's imagination purposively to achieve a coherent aim, that of writing oneself or one's group into history, writing the history of individuals or groups” (2001, p. 287).

As Scott exclaims, Morrison forges relations between past and present by creating a fantasy in Milkman’s ancestral roots. Morrison through this narrative, not only revives the motif of flying African Americans (Barnes, 2018), but she creates a fantastical plot in the novel to shape Milkman’s identity. The flight of Milkman’s great-grandfather, Solomon, from plantations creates a sense of attachment to magic and an extraordinary past, creating continuity with the centuries-old legend of flying Africans. In Hall’s words, this continuity emerges from a shared past, common historical experiences, and cultural codes that provide “stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history” (1990, p. 223). This theme of continuous frame of

reference in historical contexts is reflected in Hamilton's narrative as she writes, "We are ones who fly!" (1993, p. 2). However, unlike in the children's tale by Hamilton, the fantasy brings its own ruptures in the process of positioning Milkman's identity.

The children's song that Milkman overhears does not only rejoice and celebrate Solomon's flight but also includes the theme of betrayal and abandonment. The painful abandonment of Ryna, Solomon's wife can be observed in the verses of the poem:

"Twenty-one children, the last one Jake!

O Solomon don't leave me here

Cotton balls to choke me

O Solomon don't leave me here

Buckra's arms to yoke me" (Morrison, 1977, p. 325)

The conflict in the flight lies in the utter selfishness of the act of flight, where Solomon leaves his wife in the lurch and escapes the chains of slavery. Through the character of Ryna, who ultimately, goes mad over the grief of abandonment, Morrison showcases selfish masculinity in the act of flight. As Awkward (1990) opines, the flight of Solomon in the *Song of Solomon* is individualistic and masculine in nature. In contrast, the flight in Hamilton's children's folktale *People Could Fly* is communal thus, highlighting the axis of continuity and discontinuity in the narrative. The act of abandonment leaves Solomon's family at the mercy of the oppressors which ultimately leads to the murder of Jake, Milkman's grandfather. Thus, the legendary history of flight and the fantasy evoked by Morrison leave ruptures of discontinuity, positioning Milkman's identity on the vector of continuities and discontinuities.

4.4. Myth: A Source of Continuity Amongst Ruptures of the Past

Myth is defined as a sacred history, a link between the supernatural and natural world, employed to explain the destiny and cultural concerns of people (Harris, 1980). In the myth of flying Africans, Morrison underpins her narrative into a larger cultural framework to construct a meaningful identity for her protagonist, Milkman Dead. Morrison recreates the myth of flying Africans, setting it into the cultural and historical norms of the enslaved community. According to Barnes and Barnes (2009), the 1940s folktale collection *Drums and Shadows* was Morrison's source of the myth of flying Africans. Hall (1990) argues that myth, memory, and desire are the sources of "return to the beginning" which can "neither be fulfilled nor requited" (p. 236). In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison uses myth as a symbolic framework that transcends individual memory and narrative. In other words, in the backdrop of memory and narrative, myth offers a symbolic reference to the past that shapes the characters' present and past. Relying on the narrative of flying Africans, as exemplified in Hamilton's *People Could Fly*, Morrison puts archetypes of the hero's journey and search for identity in Milkman's coming-to-age tale. In the words of Harris, Morrison uses myth to "underpin her narrative", further adding that Morrison's success in making one black man's struggle for identity universal is partly explained by her structural use of myth to show man's constant search for reassurance in myths" (Harris, 1980). As a "sacred history", the myth of flying Africans and the narrative of freedom further elaborates Milkman's identity through continuities and discontinuities of the history of slavery.

The mythic version propounded by Morrison in Song of Solomon is an updated version of the traditional narrative of flying Africans, such as in Hamilton's *People Could Fly*. Awkward (1990) states that Morrison revitalizes the traditional narrative by grounding the

myth in a specific time and space. For instance, the nameless Black Africans in People Could Fly and other traditional narratives, take the ability of flight as a social responsibility by helping others to escape the torment of slavery. However, Morrison, as mentioned earlier, highlights discontinuities by making the myth of flight an individualistic and selfish action. Thus, it can be stated that Milkman's identity is framed across the axis of continuities and discontinuities, as he discovers his cultural roots in a shared history with ruptures and discontinuities.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, Morrison's re-imagination of a children's tale offers an intriguing re-positioning of Milkman's Dead's identity along the axis of continuities and discontinuities, as proposed by Stuart Hall. It can be argued that by embedding the elements of memory, fantasy, and myth into the traditional narrative of the flying Africans, Toni Morrison challenges the cohesive, and linear pathway to Milkman's identity. The reimagining unveils inherent ruptures within the folktale, reflecting African American identities' fragmented and multifaceted nature. Through the development of Milkman's character and his eventual self-realization through a children's song, Morrison underscores the potential of children's tales as they carry deep cultural meanings that can be reinterpreted, revealing complex history and cultural identities. The employment of memory, fantasy, and myth by Morrison in order to underpin her narrative of flying Africans, in short, offers new insights into the process of identity formation and re-formation. Morrison draws on memory as an unbreakable bond with history while embedding fantasy and myth in the narrative to shape a new and complicated version of the old folktale. It can be further argued that Hamilton's version of folktale creates unities in a shared past, whereas, Morrison embeds ruptures within those continuities, making identity a dynamic and

evolving force in her novel, *Song of Solomon*.

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