A Topoanalysis of *Song of Solomon*

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Song of Solomon, a masterpiece of Toni Morrison, depicts Milkman's soul-searching journey back to the South, which embodies the identity construction of contemporary African-Americans. As for identity construction, it mainly consists of the material and the spiritual. Milkman's failure to obtain an integrated identity in the White-dominated North largely results from his spiritual rootlessness, specifically, his lost of self. In light of topoanalysis, a better understanding of the self can be attained through a research of the places in which the subject has lived on account of the close link between self and place. Place attachment is in direct proportion to the integrity of identity. Thus, this paper aims to analyze Milkman's emotional attachment to the two places where he has lived by looking into Michigan in the North and Virginia in the South, and to throw fresh light on the construction of Afro-American identity.

Keywords: identity construction, self, place, place attachment, Milkman

Introduction

As the third novel of Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* tells a story about how Milkman, as the youngest son of an affluent African-American family settled in the North, finds out the spiritual root accidentally in his search of gold back in the South. The novel presents a panoramic picture of contemporary Afro-Americans' living conditions by revealing the conflicts between the old and the new generations, between males and females, as well as between the rich and the poor. The core lies in the issue that how African-Americans resolve with the spiritual rootlessness in the context of increasingly better off material conditions. Milkman fulfills his spiritual growth and attains the integrity of identity through his journey back to the South, which merits specially exploration.

Thus, Milkman's accomplishment of identity construction can be explored by the theory of topoanalysis, specifically, the relation between self and place. Relph defines "place" as "significant centers of actions and intentions" (Relph, 1976, p. 42). By people's identity of a place, he refers to its "persistent sameness and unity which allows that place to be differentiated from others" (Ibid, p. 45). Relph also describes this persistent identity in terms of three components: (1) the place's physical settings; (2) its activities, situations and events; and (3) the individual and group meanings created through people's experiences and intentions in regard to that place (ibid, pp. 46-47). Hence, "place" refers to certain space with rich textures and vivid details rather than a piece of land, stagnant and abstract, which can be measured by geometry. To the maximum, it may take the form of a certain area, a city or a village. To the minimum, it may exist as a residence, a room, and even a seat. As an indispensable part of human life and experience, place is closely related to the self of the ones who have

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lived there. Based on the mutual link between self and place, Bachelard puts forward the theory of topoanalysis and argues that “an understanding of the self can be attained through a study of the places in which the subject has lived” (Bachelard, 1994, p. 8).

Based on the above-mentioned, it is vital to investigate into the link between Milkman’s self recognition and the major places in his life, so as to explore why it is in the South that he finally succeeds in building up the integrated identity rather than in the South exists in his mind’s eye, nor in the North where he was born and grew up.

Alienation in the Industrial North

Milkman Dead’s childhood and adolescence, the critical period to form one’s ego identity, has been spent in an unnamed Michigan town in the northern part of United States. “Self-identity...is, in essence, bundled with the place” (Malpas, 2007, p. 177). Due to the limited interrelation with the local community and the little penetration into the Michigan town, Milkman Dead cannot establish a tight bond with the place he lives in, which results in his failure to construct an integrated identity.

The North is not only an abstract geometric grid on the map, but also the embodiment of meanings derived from what those who live there had performed in the passage of time. As a synonym of freedom and opportunities, the North is a brand new place for Afro-Americans who migrate or escape away from the South. The newness lies in the terms of ideology and economy. Ideologically, Michigan, located in the Great Lake Region, is known for the hybridity of demographic composition. In addition to the aboriginal inhabitants, Canadian settlers, French adventurers, British colonists and European immigrants have flooded there during the period from the early 17th century to the mid-19th century. Afro-Americans have to adjust to the mainstream ideology of the White. Economically, Michigan has been prompted to constantly change due to the automotive industry and the transportation revolution. There is no stability and certainty in the unceasingly changing Michigan. Thus, it is difficult for those who live there to set up an attachment with the very place. Consequently, Afro-Americans in Michigan are much more like outsiders than newcomers.

Seamon defines “insideness” as “the sum total of peoples’ firsthand involvements with the community and the geographical world in which they live” (Seamon, 1979, pp. 15-16). Alienation of Milkman in the Michigan town is mainly caused by the absence of insideness. As for the community, he has seen himself as an outsider who has nothing do with his family members for a long time. He has never taken his mother as an independent woman and a competent mother with adequate spiritual vigor until 22 years old. When his father describes his emotional trauma of marriage life, he sees his father as a total stranger and makes no sense from his chatting. He trifles with Hagar’s affections and dumps her as garbage for the cause that he gets tired of her. He has once felt certain warmth and sense of belonging in Pilate’s singing, which was rapidly replaced by the idea of stealing her gold. He cannot make sense why Guitar, his best friend, is so dedicated to Seven Days. Hence, there is no connection between Milkman and others. Considering the geographical world, Milkman fails to establish any connection, neither. His life is mainly restricted within the blocks of his father’s rental business. Even within the Afro-settlement region, he cannot find any recognition. The house property of his father is nothing more than buildings and houses in his eyes. He enjoys the affluent life provided by his father as a social parasite while objects to the ruthless attitude of his father toward the fellow tenants. He even holds certain secret hatred of being the son of his father.

Attachment is coined as “a positive affective bond or association between individuals and their residential environment” (Shumaker & Taylor, 1983, p. 233). In other words, if the bond or association with the place brings positive affectionate experience to the people, no matter in the area of emotion, behavior, or cognition, the place attachment will be built up. Conversely, if the connection with the place brings negative experience to the people, the place attachment will not be established easily. Once the place attachment fails to be constructed or maintained, there will be alienation between the people and the place. Milkman Dead has scarcely obtained positive experience from the little Michigan town. He has no other options but grows into an egotistic young man who alienates himself from the Afro-American community, wallows himself into self-pity and leads a life without orientations. Being disoriented and distorted, Milkman is bound to fail to fulfill his identity integration.

Unfamiliarity With the Illusionary South

The emotional link between the self-identity and the place is usually preserved on the layer of unconsciousness. When threatened by the distance between the physical body of the subject and the place, it will emerge on the layer of consciousness. For the Macon family, the South is not only a sanctuary of spiritual wounds for their current rootlessness and frustration, but also a palace of collective memory of their past glories and family history.

It is the spiritual rootlessness in the northern world that drives Macon Jr. and Pilate to look backwards to search for certain consolation. Their reminiscence is nothing more than a vent for their frustrations in the reality. With regards to Macon Jr., he takes such a hard lesson from his father's tragedy that he starts to learn from the modern business principles after his arrival in the North. On account of his business acumen, he has accumulated a large sum of money from his rental business and the investment in property. It is not exaggerated that Macon Jr. builds up his fortune from scratch. He succeeds in fortune accumulation while loses the recognition of his family, his tenants, and his community. He is regarded as a man of ruthlessness, so much so that as a peculiar man with dark complexion but white thought. The very core of Macon Jr.'s frustration lies in his emotional isolation in spite of his ownership of property. As for Pilate, her life in the North is nightmarish, physically and psychologically. For the former, the little town in Michigan stands striking contrast to the nostalgic South in almost every aspect. The harmonious tranquility of nature and the idyllic style of life are substituted by the hustling and bustling of passing vehicles and the clockwise hasty pulse of city life. In the heavily industrialized Michigan town, the rundown shack of Pilate, which is not powered by electricity or gas, is surrounded by modern houses with mechanic appliances. It is hard to tell whether Pilate rejects the modern techniques or cannot afford it. For the latter, Pilate aims to reestablish the bond with her brother by settling down in the next block of Macon Jr.'s residence. To her great dismay, Macon Jr. still cannot dismiss his grudge against Pilate for so many years due to a legendary trap of gold. Growth of wealth weakens down the blood ties of family.

In this context, both of Macon Jr. and Pilate resort to the old days in the South to soothe their frustrations and anxiety. The very place identity they hold towards the South has been reinforced. According to Proshansky, place identity is therefore “developed by thinking and talking about places through a process of distancing, which allows for reflection and appreciation of places” (Proshansky, Fabian, & Kaminoff, 1983, p. 61). For Macon Jr., the most unforgettable place in the South is an old farm named Paradise in Virginia. The farm symbolizes how the grand-father of Milkman won his freedom and made his own fortune. It also represents the care-free days of Macon Jr. and Pilate. For Pilate, her vivid description about the Wild Wood Night is as

beautiful as a fairy land. Back then, the nature had not been remolded by modern techniques and humans still possessed certain magic powers to get connect with animals, plants even supernatural forces.

Generally, Milkman's initial impression of the South is mainly derived from the scattered descriptions of his father and his aunt. The authentic motivations for him to take a trip back to the South can be summarized as follows. Foremost, the life on the Paradise Farm is so free and easy while the events at the Wild Wood Night are so exciting and attractive. With fantastic color and mysterious glamour, Milkman takes the South as some place unreal and strange. Moreover, Macon Jr. seldom smiles unless he mentions the South while Milkman felt a certain sense of belonging on hearing the "Song of Solomon". These exceptional moments arouses his curiosity to experience what the South is in person. The unfamiliarity between Milkman Dead and Virginia functions as a temporary barrier to his identity construction meanwhile a strong impetus to his longing for the South.

Identity Construction in the South

"Place attachment" can interpreted as "the close association between the people and the place on the basis of collective effects of affective, cognitive and behavioral aspects" (Gustafson, 2006, p. 19). Milkman's failure to set up certain connection with the Michigan town is mainly caused by the absence of self-esteem and self-pride obtained from the interaction with both of the people and the physical environment there. His spiritual rootlessness can be attributed to his self-alienation from the industrial North and his unfamiliarity with the nostalgic South. However, he succeeds in setting up a close people-place bond in his trip back to the South driven by a parcel of gold.

In the aspect of affective commitment, the places mentioned by his father and his aunt are no longer abstract or mysterious, but activated by the people who used to live there and their life experience. For example, he passed an intersection on his way to Pastor Denver's house. That is the very place where Pastor Denver's father has made earrings for Pilate. Paradise Farm, as the symbol of his grand-father's achievement, and the Butler Manson, as the shelter for young Macon Jr. and Pilate, are still there in spite of the wear and tear of time. It is in the South, in specific, Virginia, that Milkman acquires the emotional competence to resonate with the places that he has heard before. In terms of behavioral pattern, his dependence on the material goods decreases while his recognition for the African traditions increases. On the Mountain of Moutour, his fanciful leather shoes are bathed in the river, his refined clothes are ripped by the tree branch, and his watch is taken away from him. These material things not only symbolize the highly industrial North as well as the ideals and values of the White, but also an invisible barrier between Milkman and his spiritual root. At last, he is extraordinarily willing to take off his fashionable clothes and put on the African hunters' costume on the occasion of hunting. Clothes-changing is a critical moment for Milkman's transformation that he says farewell to his personal past filled with disorientation and embraces the bittersweet history of his family and his ethnic group. From the angle of cognitive process, both of the specific places in Virginia as well as the people live there function as a sort of spiritual guides for the rootless Milkman. He is seriously reprimanded when he behaves in a self-centered way while he is invited to participate into various distinctive African rituals and ceremonies. In this way, he starts to discard his previous negative thoughts, obtain virtues of empathy and sympathy, and accomplish spiritual growth. What merits specially mentioning is that he finds out the very origin of his family. When he learns that his great grand-father is the flying African Solomon, he jumps into the river and swims in the gesture like flying up repeatedly. The very core of his excitement lies in the self-esteem he gains from his family history.

In all these ways, Milkman's trip back to the South for a parcel of gold turns to be a soul-search journey. It is on the magic land of Virginia that Milkman Dead finally establishes a people-place bond in the field of affective commitment, behavioral patterns, and cognitive process. He cuts off from his egotistic past, regains his ancestral history, clarifies his foothold of the present, and gets ready to embrace a promising future with a responsibility for his family and a sense of mission for his ethnic group. The South, as a vital joint point of his life, connects major phases of his physical life as well as principal legs of his spiritual growth. This continuity "involves not the complete absence of change but some connection between the past, the present and the future within identity" has contributes greatly to the fulfillment of his self-identity (Speller, Lyons, & Twigger-Ross, 2002, p. 43).

Conclusion

Song of Solomon, as the third novel of Toni Morrison, tells an epic story about the Macon Dead family. Through the life changes of the three generations and their migration from Virginia in the South to the Michigan town in the North, this novel deals with the issues that how the young generations of Afro-Americans can establish their integrated identity, preserve their ethnic traditions, and arrive at a better prospect in the context of the white-dominated reality. On the basis of topoanalysis, place is endowed with meanings, which are also the distinctive features that distinguish this place from others, by cognition and activities of the people who live there. Meanwhile, the accumulated local features exert influences on the way how the people view their self-identity. American South, used to be the hometown of Afro-Americans, is often associated with the words like slavery, plantation, and civil war. By contrast, Afro-Americans who spend their lives in the South have been under great influence of the local social conditions. Milkman Dead, as a typical representative of the third generation of free Afro-Americans, has very limited understanding of his ancestral history and his ethnic traditions. Also, he cannot find his way into the white-dominated North, either. The spiritual rootlessness is mainly caused by his failure to establish certain place attachment with the places where he lives in. The incompleteness of his self-identity almost destroys his life. His trip in the South fulfills the vacancy of his spiritual world and awards him with a rebirth. The spiritual journey of Milkman Dead to attain an integrated identity can be taken as an example to distribute certain inspiration to the issue of Afro-Americans' survival in the context of the contemporary society.

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