



**RESEARCH PAPER**

**City Milieu, Love and Alienated Gender Relations in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon***

Muhammad Ilyas Mahmood\*<sup>1</sup> Dr. Shabbir Ahmad<sup>2</sup> Mobashra Mobeen<sup>3</sup>

1. Lecturer, Department of English, University of Okara, Punjab, Pakistan
2. Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Sahiwal, Punjab, Pakistan
3. Visiting Lecturer, Department of English, University of Okara, Punjab, Pakistan

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<b>PAPER INFO</b>	<b>ABSTRACT</b>
<b>Received:</b> June 23, 2021	In fact, many of relations and bonds of black people in Morrison suffer from alienation (spiritual or physical detachment from each other) and it is argued here that these relations suffer from alienation in the long run because of capitalistic urban environment. It is found that women suffer more from this alienation in Morrison and they have to struggle to survive under patriarchal exploitation created by capitalism and urbanization. The common experience of the black women to be alienated from their lovers or life partners urges them to form mutual bonds to deal with their problematic present and fight against the discrimination on the basis of race, class and gender. Morrison's 1977 novel <i>Song of Solomon</i> , by portraying alienated relationships, emphasizes the omnipresent power of patriarchy and warns women of the dangers that they are exposed within urban world in America after their migration from rural south to cities. It brings to light Morrison's concern with African Feminism as she brings fore the issue of alienation that women have to deal with in their struggle against patriarchal forces.
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<b>*Corresponding Author</b>  Ilyas.edu.tesl@g mail.com	

**Introduction**

The movement from rural environment to city milieu with a different mode of life is an important factor behind the feeling of alienation experienced by Afro-American characters in Morrison. Her novels as *Tar Baby*, *Song of Solomon* and *Jazz* have revealed concerns over the effect of city milieu. According to Linden Peach, in *Jazz*, Morrison presents city as a "The Promised Land" for black migrants from south with: "new-found freedoms and excitements" (Peach, 1995, pp. 113). Paquet-Deyris, taking another stance, interprets Morrison's city as a place, where "the status of the self is constantly called into questions" (Paquet-Deyris, 2001, pp. 229). Jan Furman calls city as a place with the potential to seduce and repulse characters in Morrison's fiction (Furman, 1996, pp. 92) because city on the one side is full of possibilities for fulfilling

the dreams; but this process makes these people “alienated from community in big city” (Morrison, 1993, 94-95). Although these comments are given for *Jazz*, they tell a lot about Son and Jadine’s experience in city in *Tar Baby* as well as on Milkman and Hagar’s story in *Song of Solomon*. The present study argues that an important outcome of the city milieu is its creation of alienation in gender relations in Morrison’s fiction. How and why this happens and its links with black women’s future is to be discussed here in *Song of Solomon*.

### Literature Review

Thus, this study refers to other similar works as “Redefining Americanism and American Literary Tradition (Ahmad, et. al. 2020)” where it is emphasized that creating and redefining a new American society is needed based on mutual understanding and harmony rather than battling with each other. Thus, Morrison’s stance for African American males is very much clear in her novels. She does not support the patriarchy to be free from any answerability for their deeds of aggression. It correlates with the view that Morrison “warns women against the dangerous power of patriarchal structures” (Ahmad, et al., 2020, p.327). For this reason, Elizabeth Abel emphasizes on female friendship as a powerful weapon that gives “form, expression, and reality” to behave as women in the real sense (Abel, 1981, p. 434). This female bonding is a powerful tool against patriarchy as is indicated for women’s group struggle in “Veiled Courage” (Imran et al., 2020). This study is also in line with what Ullah et al point out about dangers of living in a dream world which can make one alienated from outside real world (Ullah, et al., 2020), so it is utmost important that one must be aware as a woman of the forces that cause alienation. One such a dreamy world is the urbanized American society where money and beauty is valued more than the human feelings and moral values.

Capitalism finds its operation more in city than in village, as capitalism and urbanization go hand in hand. In fact it is the seeking of capital that brings black people from rural to urban areas where they face new challenges in the capitalistic urban environment. From her very first novel, Morrison has brought forth the linkage of capitalism with black people’s lives. Pecola, in *The Bluest Eye*, is having an obsession of the objects created by the monetary system of capitalism. Milkman’s father, in *Song of Solomon*, moves against humanity as he achieves capitalistic success in his society around. Discussing Morrison’s fictional world, most of the critics have not talked about capitalism in much details except for slight exploration of it. Doreatha Drummond Mbalia, an exceptional critic in this regard, writes a book to examine the class consciousness in Morrison’s works. She finds in *Song of Solomon* “dialectical relationship between capitalism, racism, and sexism.” Mbalia further highlights and explores the role that is played by capitalism “in the African’s exploitation and oppression ...” (1991: 226) in Morrison’s works. This capitalism in an urban environment not only creates alienation in economic terms but has the potential to create alienation in human relations in the city.

*Song of Solomon* (1977) is a novel that deals with a story that began in 1931 and moved to 1963. Its setting is a big city in Michigan and the countryside around Danville, Pennsylvania and Shalimar, Virginia. Robert Smith, a black man, jumps from the roof of a hospital named as Mercy Hospital using blue silk wings proclaiming that he will fly to the opposite shore of Lake Superior. However, he falls to meet his death. What happens next day is the birth of the first black child Milkman Dead to Ruth Foster Dead in the same Mercy Hospital. Later on, Macon Jr. gives information to Milkman, now 32 years old, that his aunt Pilate has millions of dollars wrapped in gold. With the thought that the gold would have been in a cave, Milkman sets his journey to the South. Milkman upon arrival in Shalimar does not get any gold. Instead, he gains a knowledge of his long-lost family history and profound wisdom. His travelling for gold affects his relation with his cousin, Hagar, who loves him passionately. Milkman does not care for her love while starting off his journey in search of gold and money. This action of Milkman has a resemblance with his father, Macon Dead II, who has sole purpose of pursuing money and wealth in his life. Before his departure to the South, Milkman detaches his bonds with Hagar, who becomes crazy with his abandonment and plans to end her life. Later Hagar meets death of a broken heart as she could not manage to come out of the grief. During Milkman's stay in the south, Hagar undergoes a beauty complex considering herself not coming up to the beauty standards of the modern city girls. As she considers this as the reason for Milkman's abandonment, her suffering is a replication of the crisis faced by Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*, who keeps yearning for the bluest eye to be acceptable in the world around.

Milkman's father Macon has come from the rural South in search of wealth, but he is feeling himself alienated in the city because financially he is not successful and he felt as all the houses were making him to "feel like the outsider, the property-less," (30). Money seeking is his ambition and he remains in its grip. Later he starts earning money, piles it up, builds many houses, with a feeling that he is a blessed man. To show this to his family he takes them with him on rides with the idea that in this way he could satisfy himself with the feeling to be a "successful man" (31). While he gains wealth, however, his gender relation suffers from estrangement. His alienation from his wife is clearly noticeable from his conversations with her: "You're going too fast, Macon." "If you say one more thing to me, you're going to walk back home." (34). Thus, he has a low opinion of his wife Ruth and considers her of no worth. There is no frankness between them that could be a token of love in a couples. Love in fact is non-existent in their relation. Macon even speaks harshly in front of the children: "You're a silly woman." (66). Once in a quarrel Macon goes so mad with Ruth that he starts to beat his wife. Then their son Milkman interferes: "I'll kill you" (67). After saying that Milkman leaves the room with the realization and understanding that this all would remain the same and it would change nothing between his parents.

The alienation in married life for one reason or another is a usual practice in this family. Macon's father has undergone another type of estrangement in his married life. He has married a black slave lady whom he meets on a wagon going north. He doesn't recollect the identity of his mother well as she had died when he

was only four years of age. Thus Macon's father (Milkman's grandfather) has already been alone in his marriage. Later, Macon is alienated from his wife. Macon has worked right alongside his father in the fields. And then a time comes when Milkman starts working for his father. Macon is delighted that his son belongs to him now and not to Ruth, his wife. Thus while Milkman's father is improved more and more in his business, he becomes estranged more and more from his wife. Even Milkman his son working with him is a pleasure for him as he feels that his son is closer to him than to his mother Ruth. Thus everything has an improvement in the life of Macon Dead except one major element and that is Ruth as for his own understanding. Even years later, he still wishes he should have strangled her. She hasn't made herself to stop herself from spending few nights out of their own house even at the age of fifty. But now, Macon decides it was of no importance, and less often does he get angry with her. However, the major grudge against his wife still exists, namely, the money Macon should but could not get from Ruth's father calling him "a bigger hypocrite", who was keeping all of his wealth "in four different banks" (68) but never giving his money to his son-in-law. Thus it is money that creates hatred and alienation in Macon's relation with his wife Ruth.

It is also clear from Macon's talk with Milkman that he feels alienated from Ruth for her excessive attachment to and affection with her father. He tells Ruth that there is nothing that is more horrible than a father who has the liking for the process of delivery of child by his own daughter. And when Ruth's father dies Ruth is said to be staying upstairs with him. She is not away but sitting very near to him in a chair just very close to his bed, naked, kissing him, his fingers in her mouth. This is unbearable for Macon as Ruth's husband. This abnormal relation between father and daughter may certainly have affected Macon's attitudes towards his wife, but for Macon the main reason of his alienation from his wife is none other than money.

I tried to get him to spend some of that money out of those four banks once. Some track land was going for a lot of money. (68)

Thus for Macon the most unforgivable crime Ruth has committed is her unwillingness to help him getting money for purchasing the land for future capital investment. The same thought is ruminating in the mind of Milkman about the possible cause of his father's estrangement from his mother. His father has said to him once, "You want to be a whole man, you have to deal with the whole truth". Now he is saying to himself in a sort of soliloquy:

Couldn't I be a whole man without knowing all that? .... No. You just felt something you couldn't put your finger on. His money, probably. (77)

When Macon leaves after giving a disturbing detail about his wife Ruth, Milkman feels resentment against his father as he has realized that his father's dissociation from his mother seems to have originated from nothing but "money".

It was quite the opposite from the feeling he'd had an hour or less ago. ... On the way upstairs to his room he had felt isolated (75).

Thus it has become clear to Milkman that it is money (capital) that has created such a vast gulf between his father and mother, and that there is nothing he could do to fill up the gulf, despite the railroads and other transportation facilities that have existed in the city milieu.

For the exploration of Marxist viewpoint of class difference in the novel, the work is making use of Marxist philosophy to analyze *Morrison's Song of Solomon* and this study takes place within the boundaries of Marxist philosophy. The theoretical framework for this research is Marxist theory of class struggle in particular and also includes ideas about classes in general. *Song of Solomon* is an antithesis of American success myth which is highlighted and promoted through media and film industry. America is presented itself as a country which is making remarkable economic development and thus she is a land of opportunities for every citizen. This idea of success gave rise to class difference and resulted into various complexes among the lower middle class while upper class got rotten and corrupt. This idea of class difference is being looked at from the point of view of Marx that gap between the rich and the poor is the direct outcome of the capitalistic ideals. With the race of materialism and development comes the love of capital. This love gives way to the love of power which results into grudges, hatred, jealousy and loss of moral values. Milkman's father, an important part of the novel, reaches to success though such means which diminish his moral consciousness. So, Milkman's desire has been instigated by this success myth where people become rich and can control this world. Murders, crimes and hatred among the classes, all are the product of such dreams.

Milkman has witnessed alienation, due to money, in relations not only between his father and mother but in other couples too. Having an exchange of words with his father about his mother, he goes to Pilate's house where he finds a similar domestic crisis. His father's sister Pilate has two daughters, Reba and Hagar. Reba's new male friend asks her for some amount of money but she cannot give him money for whatever the reasons. It is not the first time he is demanding money from her rather this man has already received many expensive gifts from her on various times. But this time he does not forgive her for not giving him the money he is demanding and thus a thought comes to his mind that she is telling a lie and is asking him to leave. Few moments later they are quarreling in the backyard and the man is becoming arrogant. Reba starts crying and Hagar runs to Pilate, "He's hitting her (93) Pilate takes a knife and threatens him to leave her daughter. This incident does not shock Milkman as he has experienced such conflicts between his father and mother, but it does affect Milkman as he himself has to undergo such alienation in his relation with Hagar who loves him possessively and excessively. He finally turns away from Hagar and who dies during his search for gold.

In this case Milkman is following the steps of his father and grandfather who have also alienation in their gender relations for material reasons. Milkman's own words for his father resonate his father's situation for the greed of wealth:

“by loving what that father had loved: property, good solid property, the bountifulness of life. ...” (300).

When Milkman asks for a relief to go on a travel, his father responds in a way that shows his mindset about material and wealth: “Money is freedom,” (163). Milkman is going away from the bitterness between his father and mother, but his father wants him to stay with him. Both son and father are trying to convince each other, when, all of a sudden, the father mentions the gold sacks in possession of Pilate who has left them somewhere in distant areas south of village. The narrator describes Milkman’s lust for money and gold at the moment when he hears his father:

“As suddenly as an old dog drops a shoe when he smells raw meat ..... About Pilate and a sack.” (163)

The analogy of a dog running after raw meat shows the hunger for money and gold in Milkman and explains his abandonment of Hagar who dies under the misery of alienation for her love with Milkman. Later, Milkman goes after Pilate’s golden sacks in spite of his fear that she would not give him any information about the gold, as he tells his friend Guitar about Pilate’s getting of the gold when she was only twelve years of age. “She waited in a cave with a dead man for three days” (178). When he has reached a town in the South, he begins to talk about his father with the people there, but his whole attention is on gold:

“Suddenly, in the midst of his telling, Milkman wanted the gold.” (236).

This desire for gold in Milkman has its roots in the capitalistic ambience around, as the narrator says: “He wanted the money – desperately, he believed” (80). The narrator further explains the motivation behind his longing: “Milkman wanted boats, cars, airplanes ...with his money” (179). The desires are created in him as a result of his interaction with the wealthy people owning them in the city. This frenetic search for wealth makes Milkman blind to the love of Hagar who dies crying for him.

Class difference is the result of the ideology that one can accumulate as much wealth as he can and later on he can control the world. This notion increases the gap between upper and lower class of a society and thus destroys the harmony, peace and love. It promotes selfishness, self-centeredness, hatred, jealousy and insensitivity towards other human being. One thing remains significant in the story i.e class difference which is a result of accumulation of capital in few hands. This class difference which according to Marx is the outcome of unjust division of wealth in a nation creates complex among different strata of society. Race of success on the bases of money and power creates complex among the lower strata of society which adopts every possible means to get that position no matter through right or wrong. Similarly, Milkman wants to be at the top by hook or crook. So the study is focusing on the theories of Marx about class struggle and class difference which is corrupting the society. The thrift for reaching at the top becomes a cause of loss of moral values and human emotions mean nothing. Human emotions and feelings have no place in such

society where people in power treat other human being as a commodity. So, the novel is a critique of the success myths of America. Marxism is very relevant to the subject treated by Morrison in this novel.

While Milkman travels south for gold and thus alienates himself from Hagar, his travel, however, does provide an opportunity for him to get a relief from the alienation in his parents. He wants to go far away from the quarrels of his parents as he was thinking that his own future could be like them too. He fears that his parents' gender relation may affect his own life, as he finds difficulty developing a stable relation with Hagar. He hates the acridness in the relationship of his parents, and the opinion of their righteousness about themselves and their standpoints. In his attempt to shun the experience of alienation in his parents, he has actually shunned commitment and decision making.

"He wanted to know as little as possible .... – but not their all-consuming devotion" (221).

He has always believed that his childhood is unproductive as the knowledge he has gained from his parents is a poisoned memory heavy with the colors of illness and lacking of forgiveness. That is why he often closes his eyes and throws his arms over his face to avoid the troublesome thoughts. His life in the city is not satisfying and he has a feeling of boredom. "The city was boring (107)". That is why he wants a break from city and makes a plan to go to the countryside of Virginia. Milkman is in trance of Hagar. From the very beginning, he is in deep love with her. She takes a great care of him with love and he feels good in receiving this all love and care. But Hagar has clarified her concept of falling in love with someone when Milkman is chasing her: "in love with the man I marry" (97). Then time comes when he decides to call it off. The indifference of Milkman drives Hagar into craziness and her passion converts to fever. It literally smothers her at night and she gets up with disturbed mind in the morning. She goes here and there with wandering thoughts but getting peace nowhere and in nothing. "Nothing could pull her mind away" from Milkman (127). Hagar attacks Milkman with a knife in rage but he is saved. Later he wills her dead as she has become furious because of Milkman's alienation from her.

"Either she will kill me or she will drop dead. ....Choose. Die, Hagar. Die. Die. Die" (129).

The alienation created by Milkman works on Hagar to such an extent that she is experiencing utter loneliness from everything around. The emotional deprivation reflects distress which may result in self-destruction, as Lewis Feuer suggests about alienation that it can make someone "to act self-destructively" (1962 132). Hagar starts behaving self destructively. "Leave me alone." "You already alone" (137). Hagar is crying and pulling her hair with frustration but there is "the wilderness of Southside" (137) in it that is felt by Milkman's mother Ruth. It is the south to which Milkman next travels to find gold and wealth hidden by his aunt Pilate, abandoning Hagar's love.

Abandonment of women by men is not an unusual phenomenon in Milkman's family. Milkman gets to know that Jake's father, his great-grandfather, is the legendary flying African, Solomon, who tried to escape slavery by flying back to Africa. Irony is that Solomon abandons his wife Ryna and their twenty-one children. This was a huge challenge and burden for Ryna who becomes insane with this burden. Her sorrow, like Solomon's mythic flight, takes the form of a legendary scale in the history of Milkman's society. Similarly, Milkman's flight from Michigan for his financial gains is a selfish act that causes Hagar to die of heartbreak. The abandonment of women by men in *Song of Solomon*, again and again, portrays that the alienated gender relation is almost a hereditary practice, and the factors contributing to this tragedy are capital and wealth which keeps deteriorating gender relations. Thus, *Song of Solomon* is an important book for a black feminist criticism – at the intersection of African and feminist ideologies.

The epigraph to *Song of Solomon* -- The fathers may soar / And the children may know their names – also highlights the theme of alienation in the novel. The title *Song of Solomon* brings into focus the biblical book of the eponymous title, indicating that the novel addresses an age-old topic. The biblical book shows a talk between the two lovers, King Solomon and his bride Shulamite. Similarly, Morrison's novel tells love stories, though ironically these love stories end in alienation. By giving her characters the names of biblical figures Morrison brings a comparison of her characters with these historical figures. For instance, the biblical Hagar, Sarah's handmaiden, bears Sarah's husband Abraham a son and is then banished from his sight. Likewise, Morrison's Hagar is deserted by Milkman. The similarity of both ladies' experiences brings into limelight the theme of women abandonment in the patriarchal society. Hagar loves Milkman passionately and intensively. When Milkman does not seem to care for her love and goes away in search of gold, Hagar loses her mind. She stands there for hours cradling her breasts until Guitar takes her to her mother's home. She lies in bed for three days completely oblivious to anything they do to bring her to her sense. She goes out, buys clothes and put up make-ups. However, Milkman does not seem to notice her. Disillusioned, she lies down with a fever and dies soon after. Shown as completely lost, Milkman loses sense of purpose other than his desires for economic comforts. The loneliness and desertion felt by Milkman are the result of the vacuum in Milkman's character -- the sealing off from other human consciousness. This isolation is emphasized throughout the novel. At a point early in the novel, as Milkman walks down the street, he finds himself on a crowded side-walk and moving in the opposite direction from everyone else. "He cannot fathom why he doesn't walk on the other side of the street where no one seems to be" (78). The persistent isolation prevalent in Milkman's story leads him to a dehumanizing distance from others. One can see this in his tendency to turn human value into commodity. From his car to Hagar, all remain so distanced from him that all just assume the status of objects of physical comfort.

Critics may have reason to believe that Hagar is partly responsible for alienation, as the beauty complex created by city life turns her away from Milkman.



For this LaVon Walther speaks with emphasis, "Hagar believes she must buy and put on beauty to attract Milkman's look and his love" (Walther, 1990, pp. 780). Oppressing one's thought processes, as through city standards of beauty, then, may lead to disaster. Hagar's journey to objectification and, ultimately, to physical death invites a strongly criticized cosmopolitan notion of femininity. The novel brings forth Hagar's painful quest of urban standards of female beauty. When she comes to the bitter realization that her efforts to reach the ideal of urban female beauty are fruitless, Hagar feels exhausted and hopeless. Thinking "He's never going to like my hair" (320) Hagar takes a knife to remove her hair. This "silky hair" haunts her. (315). Pilate consoles her daughter before her death bed but that is of no use.

Morrison's delineation of feminist concerns is perhaps most clearly evident in the predominantly female voices of a chorus in the last chapters of *Song of Solomon*. Shalimar females such as Susan Byrd and Sweet openly criticize Solomon for his desertion of Ryna and his off-springs. In one sense, Morrison criticizes not only men but women too, in this novel, for their submission to a system of patriarchy. Hagar's suicide, and the funeral, leads to her aunt Pilate's publically repeated call for "mercy" (322). Pilate beckons to the community, asking them to seek understanding of and compassion for women like Hagar. Therefore, though the voices of Ryna and Hagar do not shine through in the text, their stories do ask females to combat their subjugation in a system ruled by unjust forces. Aoi Mori argues about the female characters in Morrison who are shown "as subjects that emerge from an oppressed situation and who seek survival" (Mori, 1999, pp. 89), however, Hagar ultimately proves unsuccessful in challenging the racist and sexist forces around her, suggesting that Morrison's call for resistance and survival is not an easy task because this demand requires much effort and action.

Morrison is not a pessimistic writer, as she believes that things will turn better if the alienated self can reconnect with other people and restore human relations. When Milkman arrives in the south he sees women. "The women's hands were empty. No pocketbook, no change purse, no wallet," (259). Milkman has never seen such a woman in his life like these women. Passing through Danville he has to go to the town of Shalimar where neither buses nor trains are on the route. So he buys a car for his travel to Shalimar. When he loses his car he murmurs: "I may have to buy another car" (266). The faces of the men turn to look at him, and Milkman wondered if he has said anything wrong. Always saying or thinking that he doesn't deserve any bad treatment from others, now this "others" comes to him as something special. But there is something he feels now — here in Shalimar that reminds him of how he used to feel in his aunt Pilate's house. And there is something more. The city has created in him the love of gold. It is his stay in the country that inculcates in him a feeling for other people. Milkman remembers his parents. His mother's smile. Now it seems to him that such sexual deprivation would have affected her. "What might she have been like had her husband loved her? (300)". Hating his parents seems illogical now. His mind goes to Hagar. He has used her — her love, her craziness -- and destroyed her. Having liberated from the shallow which has previously characterized him, Milkman starts to have self-analysis. An old man in Shalimar has a talk with him: "Don't you city boys

know how to handle yourself?"(281)". Milkman remains oblivious of a purpose or direction of his life in the city. It also reminds the reader of a scene -- a vision of Milkman about his alienation and dissociation from others in the city.

The street was even more crowded with people, all going in the direction he was coming from. (78)

This dreamy experience may imply that Milkman starts going back, as he moves to country area for knowledge and wealth, which his alienation from other people, his parents and his love begins to dissolve.

In *Song of Solomon* the character who shows alienation from his love is a male-Milkman Dead. And Morrison has a special reason for the selection of a male as the protagonist in this novel which is best described by Ashley Pond: "he actually serves as a male vehicle for women's voices" (Pond,2009, p. 1). Thus, Morrison uses Milkman for male awareness as Morrison herself has stated about her choosing of Milkman because, "he had more to learn than a woman" (Quoted in Erickson, 2006,p 52). Michael Awkward opines "The text of *Song of Solomon* serves as a wonderfully appropriate site for a black feminist criticism" (Awkward, 1990,p. 484). Clearly, for Morrison, the concerns in this novel include black female independence and agency with a sense of power and persistence to have a successful life as well as a professional career for money for their families as well as for themselves so that they would not depend on men for that and ultimately bear loss. However, the novel's ambiguous ending, with Milkman poised in the air on his way to struggling for his life with Guitar, implies that the character of black men remains to be defined. Milkman began to realize the damaging effects of his oppressive dealings of the women. However, it does not happen when Hagar was alive. Thus, her suffering in life does not lead Milkman to a realization of his role as a male oppressor in making a woman's life a hell.

## Conclusion

This article has successfully discussed the theme of alienation in love and gender relations created by capitalistic and city mode of life in blacks in Toni Morrison's fiction. In fact, Morrison exposes the system of patriarchy in which the male may make himself free from the role of a lover or responsible life partner. She highlights the role patriarchal mindset plays in making gender relation alienated in *Song of Solomon* with an emphasis on black males who need to shun their role as oppressors of their women. In *Song of Solomon* capitalism and selfishness of city milieu make gender relation estranged. And it further brings fore a point that if Morrison's fiction deal with black race, then this race often goes along with gender as Morrison is concerned, consciously or unconsciously, with the cultural effects of radicalized and gendered thoughts.

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