

To Walk or to Fly? The Legend of the Flying Africans in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*

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Abstract

The chief focus of this paper is to explore the aesthetics and artistic leverage of magic realism, which are arguably deployed in the novels of two African American writers and thinkers, Toni Morrison and Paule Marshall. The theme of human aerial flight permeates the mythology of Black America. Examples of the metaphor are found in major musical genres, myths and poetry in Black cultures that span the Caribbean and southern North America, embracing generations to testify to the depth of the cosmological and conscious projection of systems of flight escape and homeland return. The incorporation of the legend of the flying Africans in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, and Paule Marshall's *Praise Song for the Widow* constitutes an alternate realm of transmission and transformation of the canonical tales of Black communities. Beyond those heroic tales my paper offers insights on how the power of flying can be used to escape any dangers, and how can Africans share the power of flying with their world counterparts.

Keywords: Magic realism, aerial flight, myth, legend, power of flying, Cosmological.

1. Introduction

"Let me give you an example: the flying myth in *Song of Solomon*, if it means Icarus to some readers, fine, I want to take credit for that. But my meaning is specific: It is about black people who could fly. That was always part of the folklore of my life; flying was one of our gifts. I don't care how silly it may seem. It's everywhere—people used to talk about it; it's in the spirituals and gospels. Perhaps it was wishful, thinking...escape death and all that. But suppose it wasn't.

What might it mean? I tried to find out in *Song of Solomon*" Le Clair Thomas ("The Language Must not sweat")

The African traditions ultimately survived the harsh forces which transported them from their homeland to other continents is a salient subject in World history, but how they have been employed in varied artistic forms still requires further investigation. Anthropological studies show abundant evidence that people of African Diaspora in various parts of the world still practice traditions that are traceable only to Africa, and their variants continue to manifest themselves remarkably in oral and written literature particularly in African American Literature.

Understanding these traditions and how individual authors have employed them in their works could lay a solid foundation for correct reading, critiquing, and appreciating the thematic and, aesthetic aspect of a given text. Hence, my interest in writing on the Legend of the Flying Africans in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*.

Morrison and Marshall through their literary works show a deep concern for validating and enriching African Americans culture that has long been under attack by the dominant culture. As a matter of fact, it is difficult to read Morrison's and Marshall's fictions without alluding to myth elements of folklore or the profound cultural context on which their writings are based.

The Legend of the flying African is a canonical tale which resonates throughout the expressive traditions of that part of the African Diaspora which has known slavery in the New World. Morrison's and Marshall's

Morrison's and Marshall's works are worth studying since their revisions and altered emphases raise questions about previous cultural definitions of heroism and community responsibility, seeing these now from a feminist and an Afro centric perspective. Both Morrison and Marshall incorporate the legend of the Flying Africans into their larger artistic projects, with the ultimate aim of producing, a transformative or even a revolutionary cultural form. Many scholars have addressed the legend of the flying African motif in their works; my work is different since I will address the issue from a native African perspective. This work will use both qualitative and quantitative data. It will require an Interdisciplinary approach; I will draw tools from different but complementary disciplines to address the Legend of the Flying African motif.

2. The legend of the flying African in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Paule Marshall's *Praise song for the Widow*.

O sugarman don't leave me here cotton balls to choke me
O sugarman don't leave me here
Buckra's arms to yoke me...
Sugarman done fly away
Sugarman done gone
Sugarman gone home. (*Song of Solomon* 49).

Morrison's novel *Song of Solomon* is essentially the story of Milkman Dead who must learn to be a complete person, or at least have a notion of it. The epigraph to Morrison's novel "The fathers may soar and the children may know their names".

Milkman's southward journey throughout the book becomes wrapped up in his decoding of his Pilate's "Sugarman" blues song, and of his own ancestry. He must learn names and put the pieces of his lineage back together if he is to gain any understanding of his own identity. For Morrison, this identity is "a collective rather than an individual construct...in relation to a broad sense of history and community"(Morrison 1977). Thus, Milkman must learn the names of personal histories of his ancestors in order to better understand his own place in the world. He must take this course in opposition to his father, Macon Dead, who rejects his family; and has adopted a heartless materialistic process of property accumulation and ownership in order to attain upper middle class status and comfort.

Though the theme of flight is present in the novel from the first page, the story of the Flying Africans does not emerge until the end of Milkman quest. Outside Solomon's General Store, in Shalimar, Virginia Milkman watches children play a circular singing game:

About eight or nine boys and girls
were standing in a circle.
A boy in the middle, his arms outstretched, turned around like an airplane,
while the other sang some meaningless rhyme:
Jay the only son of Solomon/come
booba yalle, come booba tambee/
whirl about and touch the sun /come booba yalle, come booba tambee... (*Song of Solomon* p.267).

At this point the words are nonsense, meaningless rhymes to Milkman, but similar names, and a similar story can be found in *Drums and Shadows*. Shad Hall, descendant of Belali Mohamet states, "Muh gran was Hestuh, Belali's daughter... She say Belali an all he fambly come on some boat from Africa. Belali hab plenty daughter, Medina, Yaruba, Fatima, Bentoo, Hestuh Mragaret, and Chaalut" (*Drums and Shadows* 1986).

Interestingly, Morrison's Solomon (as Milkman will soon find out) has 21 children, all boys, the youngest son, Jake. Morrison's words "come booba yalle, come booba tambee" have been noted in various versions of the legend in *Drums and Shadows* and elsewhere. What may be occurring here is a second level of transmission between orality and novelistic discourse. The novelist may be using oral legend as recorded by folklore collectors. The result is a transformation of the once static artifact, which is now reworked by contemporary storyteller.

The role of children in bearing this legend in their circular song games is important to Morrison, especially considering her epigraph. Daniel Hoffman refers to "the nonsense counting-out rhymes of children" as a frequent context for oral folklore no longer in wide circulation among the broader population." (Hoffman 1957).

Virginia Hamilton's story "The People Could Fly", is part of a large picture book, presumably for children (but certainly relevant for adults as well). She ends her tale, "They say that the children of the ones who could not fly told their children. And now me, I have told it to you." (Hamilton 1987) Another male who seeks to know about flying and comes upon children's game is Shaki of the Suriname Legend. Limon reminds us of the potentially radical nature of the oral lore possessed by children, stating that, "Children games constitute a potential counter hegemonic practice....After early childhood, however, life becomes a painful matter of growing up into advanced capitalism." (Limon 1983) Witnesses Milkman own situation, in which he is stuck in this pain, is also marked by his realization that in his own childhood, "he was never asked to play those circle games, those singing games, to join in anything." (Hamilton 1987)

Milkman must now learn to pay close attention to the children's song, for it's the key to the meaning of his own ancestry which he seeks. He memorizes the song, the last refrain of which goes like this: "Solomon done fly, Solomon done done, /Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon done gone home. Through the words to the song, combined with information he has learned from people in Shalimar, Milkman pieces together the fact that he is Solomon, the flying African great grandson. The knowledge of his ancestry, the connection to a line of people he can now name, and especially to one so heroic, is elating to Milkman. Milkman's initial joy in naming his people sparks in him the automatic desire to celebrate Solomon's heroism:

[He] could fly! You hear me?My
Great-granddaddy could fly!Goddam!...
He didn't need no airplane.Didn't need
No fuckin tee double you ay.He could
fly his own self !...He just
took off;got fed up.All the way up!
No more cotton!No more bales! No more
shit!He flew,babby. Lifted his
beautiful black ass up in the sky
and flew on home.Can you dig it ?(*Song of Solomon* p332).

The acknowledgement of this heroism, the awareness of a male ancestor he can really be proud of, prompts Milkman journey to wholeness. But it is important to understand that movement in collective, rather than individualistic terms.

Central to Morrison's conception of the aesthetic principles guiding her own and other African American art is the rejection of "the mandates of individualism" in favor of a social whole.(Morrison 1981).Women and children become for Morrison, the important members of this social whole-whom Milkman and other would be male heroes must learn to consider.

In speaking of the legend of the Flying Africans as heroic Morrison states, "The heroic is hidden in the lore. The archetypes have this sort of glory, such as the triumph of this flying African. There's also the pity of the consequences of that heroism, so there's a mixture of terror and delight"(Ruas 1985). Milkman's first response to his new knowledge is this triumphant glory. But all of his informants about the past, in Shalimar, have been women and children. In these women's stories and questions, the double-edged nature of Solomon's flight is ever present, but it takes Milkman a while to comprehend.

Susan Byrd explains to him,

I guess [Solomon] must have been hot stuff. But anyway, hot stuff or not, he disappeared and left everybody. Wife, everybody, including some twenty-one children. And they say they all saw him go. The wife saw him and the children saw him. They were working in the fields.(*Song of Solomon* p326).

Byrd tells, milkman that the wife left behind named Ryna, went crazy for grief. Moreover, that it is rare nowadays for a woman to be unable to live without a particular man, to die for love. In saying this she makes connection to Milkman's cousin Hagar, whom he has loved and left, and who, unknown to him at the time is dying for lack of his love,. Thus, Milkman is symbolically connected to Solomon, the flying, leaving hero. Of the several references to flight in the novel, Morrison's calls Solomon's, "the most magical, the most theatrical and, for Milkman, the most satisfying. It is also the most problematic -- to those he left behind" (Morrison 336). Milkman must come to understand the problematic side to Solomon's flight, as well as its heroic side. Again it is a woman, Sweet, who calls his attention to this: "who'd he leave behind?" She asks him during his elated retelling of Solomon's heroism. It is only after Milkman learns of Hagar's death and by extension his own responsibility to other people that he starts to perceive Solomon's irresponsibility. While he dreamt of flying, Hagar was dying.

Sweet's silvery voice came to him:

Who'd he leave behind! he left Ryna behind and twenty children. Twenty-one, since he dreamed the one he tried to take with him and Ryna had thrown herself all over the ground, lost her mind, and was still crying in a ditch. Who looked after those twenty children? Jesus Christ, he left twenty-one children... But it was the children when who sang about it and kept the story of this leaving alive.(*Song of Solomon* 336).

Women and children persevere as the unsung heroes, and male heroism is more traditionally touted in oral legend. This seeming imbalance is complicated by the fact that women and children, in Morrison's reworking, are the ones who sing the praises. But in this act of singing, telling, remembering, they are also questioning and critical. They are the ones who remind Milkman about the people left behind by the individualistic male heroic act.

In this respect, each tale must have leaving structured into it : for it is certainly not the dominant culture, as represented by driver, overseer or master, who will pass on this legend of resistance to the mounting generations. Some slaves must always be left behind to tell the tale. Since it is almost always only those slaves born in Africa who can fly, there are usually some American- born slaves left behind--often children. It is well and truly, the fate of these people, this link in chain of heroism that Morrison's revision and particular concern underscores. Morrison states that, "Folklore can also contain myths that re-activate themselves endlessly through providers--the people who repeat, reshape, reconstitute, and reinterpret them."(Morrison 1989).

Morrison and Marshall are two contemporary providers who transform aspects of the collective memory. Marshall has stated that the collection of Gullah folktales from the Georgia Sea Islands. Found in

Drums and Shadows formed the basis for *Praisesong for the Widow*.

Turning to *Praisesong for the Widow*, it concerns Avey (Avatara) Johnson, an upper middle class black woman in her late fifties who goes on a literal and figurative journey to regain her lost heritage which she has pushed aside as she and her husband became caught up in the US's ethos of materialistic accumulation. Thus, Avey's progression in the novel is in many ways similar to Milkman's.

Marshall has explained that her goal in writing *Praisesong* was to connect "this well--heeled middle class black widow" with the Gullah folktale of the Ibos stepping across the water back to Africa" (Marshall 1989). Although the "Ibo Landing" story does not contain flying, it is similar in many respects to several versions of the flying African legend. Both stories contain specially empowered slaves who leave slavery and travel back to Africa by "superhuman" means. The "official" footnoted version of the story of Ibo Landing as recounted by the folklore collectors in *Drums and Shadows* reads,

A group of slaves from the Ibo tribe
refused to submit to slavery.

Led by their chief and singing tribal
songs, they walked into the water

and were drowned at a point on Dunbar Creek later named Ebo (Ibo) landing. (Drums
1986).

In its statement of a chosen refusal made by an African leader and his tribe, this note hints of empowered agency on the part of the Africans. But no mention is made here of the possibility that the Ibos walked on water, and Africa is not identified as the destinations. Later in *Drums and Shadows*, Floyd White, in his retelling, aligns the tale more closely with that of the Flying Africans. He states that the Ibos, "mahch right down in duh ribbuh tuh mahch back tuh Africa" (*Drums and Shadows* 1986). In his version, although the ending of drowning is the same, Ibos are not walking to their death, but marching back to Africa, to freedom, their homeland and away from white oppression.

Marshall in her own revision of the tale goes even further to endow the Ibos with several special powers, similar to those of the Flying Africans. Each summer since she was seven years old, Avey is sent down to the Sea Island of Tatem, South Carolina, to stay with her great Aunt Cuney. Her Great Aunt takes Avey down to the Ibo landing about twice a week and ceremonially tells her, her version of the tale as told to her by her grandmother. Cuney always begins, "It was here that they brought them. They taken' em out of the boats right here where we's standing" (Marshall 1986). In Marshall's revision of the story, when the Ibos land, they seize up their captors, look far into the future and see all about slavery, and the reconstruction: "those pure-born Africans was peoples my grand said could see in more ways than one" (Marshall 1983). This omniscient glance tells them all they need to know and they simply turn and march across the water back to Africa: "and they wasn't taking they time no more. They had seen what they had seen and those Ibos was stepping" (Marshall 1983).

Despite all the iron and chains around their necks and wrists, they don't sink, and they successfully walk on water back to Africa. This is reminiscent of Esteban Montejo's similar story: "there are those who say the Negroes threw themselves into rivers. This is untrue. The truth is they fastened a chain to their waists which was full of magic. The chains of slavery transform into the chains of empowerment.

Cuney continues,

But chains didn't stop those Ibos none.

Neither iron. The way my gran'tol'it (other folks in Tatem said it wasn't so and that she was crazy but she never paid'em no mind) 'cording to her they just kept on walking like the water was solid ground. Left the white folks standin' back here with they mouth hung open and they taken off down of the river on foot.

Stepping... those Ibos ! Just upped and walked on away not two minutes after getting here ! (Esteban 1968).

Cuney's parenthetical comments bring up the issue of believability and veracity which is such a common aspect of the Flying African legend. Because flying and walking on water are not recognized as humanly possible in a western scientific framework, assertions of their occurrence are met with disbelief. So the teller must affirm veracity by eyewitness avowals and other strong convictions, or else, like Cuney's grandmother, pay no attention to the naysayers. Marshall pushes the point of what we believe and why, even further when she has a ten-year-old Avey ask "But how come they didn't drown, Aunt Cuney?" (Marshall 1983)

Cuney replies with a "quietly dangerous note" in her voice: Did it say Jesus drowned when he want walking on the water in that Sunday school book your momma always sends with you?" (Marshall 1983).

Marshall here implicitly posits the story of Ibo Landing as a spiritually empowering legend for African descended people, which in some ways can serve as a companion discourse to the canonical stories of Christianity. She also acknowledges the risk in the telling: those who could pass the tale on may also have to face community censure or scorn. Thus, the very act of telling itself can be seen as heroic.

An important aspect of Marshall's refiguration of the legend of powerful Africans returning to Africa is the empowered role of women as transmitters. Cuney's story is marked repeatedly by the phrases "my gran' said" and "cording to my gran'." This legend is one passed down from grandmother to granddaughter, to grandniece, in a matrilineal perpetuation of knowledge through story.

Though her gran' is always present in Cuney's version of the story, Cuney's naming seems very different, for example, than the validating naming Mary Granger, in her appendix to *Drums and Shadows*, uses citing Capt. Robert Sutherland Rattray as expert of African beliefs about flying and witchcraft. In her essay,

"Grandma's story", Trinh Minh--ha writes, "I memorize, recognize, and name my source(s), not to validates my voice of an authority (for we authority in the history of literature, and wise women never draw their powers from authority), but to evoke her and sing. The bond between women and word"(Drums 1986).

Marshall herself has written of the importance of this matrilineal bond of language in shaping her own fictive voice. She speaks, in "From the poets in the kitchen", of her mother and her mother's friends who talked in her kitchen:

They were women in whom the need
for self-expression was strong, and since language was the only vehicle
readily available to them they made of
it an art form that--in keeping with
the African tradition in which art
and life are one-- was an integral part of their lives.(Marshall 1983).

The heritage of these women, like Marshall's own, touches multiple points in the African diaspora-- many are born in Barbados, living in New York, of African descent. Like Avey's Aunt Cuney, and Marshall, they revise and transmit the stories of their past, the canonical tales of cultural memory. And it is from their talk that Marshall develops her own aesthetic philosophy and linguistic skills.

At the end of the novel Avey accepts her true name of Avatara, decides to spend part of each year in Tatem, South Carolina (she even sell her house in North White Plains), and send for her grandchildren each Summer, vowing to take them down to Ibo Landing at least twice a week and ritually retell her namesake's tale. Marshall's last lines of the novel are the beginning of Aunt Cuney's (now Avey's) tale: "it was here that they brought them.....they took them out of the boats right here where we're standing"(Marshall 1983). This movement is the circular shape of return.

In this line of thought, Barbara Christian points out that, "thus Paule Marshall, like Avey Johnson, must continue the process by passing on the rituals. And this function is finally the essence of her praise song" (Christian 1985). Christian here names the retelling as a process implying that it is not a static repetition or imitation, but a creative re-fabrication.

After this broad analysis on the legend of the Flying Africans with particular reference to Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Marshall's *Praise song for the Widow*, how can the power of flying be used to escape any danger in our violent planetary village?

3. Flying as a mean to escape Danger or death.

Our global world is more is more violent. Terror, horror, car accidents, plane crashes are common place. The tremendous progress made by man in Science does not prevent such incidents. Africans on their part boast themselves of having supernatural power to escape any danger. Why are they passive? Why can't they help their fellow men? It is to bring my humble contribution to the world of science that I have decided to achieve a project covering ECOWAS states. I aim at persuading some Africans conjurers to share the power of flying with their world counterparts. I must confess that it is a huge task which requires commitment, resources and time. The first part of this project involves Benin conjurers.

Now, to cut the long story short, can a man fly or walk across water? To find answers to these puzzles I have exchanged with 25 Conjurers in the southern part of Benin and 25 Conjurers in the Northern part. During our conversations, I have asked them the following questions: 1.Can a man fly? Or Walk on water? 2-How can a power of flying enable us to escape Dangers? 3- If this power of flying exists, how do they account for the death of some Africans in car accidents or plane crashes? 4- Why are you keeping those powers secrets? 5-Do you have special planes for flying? 6-Can everybody see and have access to these planes? 7- What are your planes made up with? All the 50 traditional doctors have almost given the same answers. According to them, "A man can fly and even walk on water. Even if a man is not naturally endowed with this special power, he can use a special charm to escape any danger. For instance, the witches use the power of flight to attack their victims on any part of the planet. The death of some Africans in car accidents or plane crashes can be justified by the fact that some Africans turn back to their African traditions, and they no longer respect the law of nature; they confessed. (My own translation). Coming to the answer of the fourth question, they have said that they don't see the necessity to share this power to the western world which spent more than 400 hundred years underrating African's capacity of doing something good, to demonize African traditions; and to put the centre of invention,

technologies progress in Europe. Whenever one of us is trying to bring his contribution to the world of science, they crush him. In short; Africans are not given the chance to embark on globalization with their own label. (My own translation). As for the fifth, the sixth and the seventh questions they made no comment. They have just said that the time will come Africa will make wonders. For a person hailing from a western hemisphere; the aforementioned answers or comments will sound silly or bizarre. Africans and Europeans do not see the world from the same gaze; time and space in both hemispheres have not the same meaning.

Before giving my own appraisal of the puzzle under discussion a glance at Paul Marshall's use of the legend in her novel is worth having,

But chains didn't stop those Ibo none. Neither iron the way my gran tol it (other folks in Tatem said it wasn't so and that she was crazy but never paid' em no mind) 'cording to her they just kept on walking like the water was solid ground. Left the white folks standin' back here with they mouth hung open and they take off down of the river on foot. Stepping [...] these Ibo! Just upped and walked on away not two minutes after getting here!(Praise Song for Widow p39)

For Aunt Cuney, despite all the iron and chains around their necks and wrists, they don't sink and they successfully walk on water back to Africa. This is reminiscent of Esteban Montejo's similar story: "There are those who say the Negroes threw themselves into rivers. This is untrue. The truth is they fastened a chain to their waists which was full of magic."(Montejo 1968). Thus, the chains of slavery are transformed into the chains of empowerment.

Cuney's parenthetical comments bring up the issue of 'believability' and veracity which is such a common aspect of the Flying African legend because flying and walking on water are not recognized as humanly possible in a western scientific framework, assertions of their occurrence are met with disbelief. So the teller must affirm veracity by eyewitness avowals and other strong convictions, or else, like Cuney's grandmother, pay no attention to the naysayers. Marshall pushes the point of what we believe and why, even further when she has a ten-year-old Avey ask "But how come they didn't drown, Aunt Cuney?"(Marshall 1983).

Cuney replies with a quietly dangerous note in her voice: "Did it say Jesus drowned when he went walking on the water in that Sunday school book your momma always sends with you?"(Marshall 1983).

Marshall and Dash here implicitly posits the story of Ibo Landing as a spiritually empowering legend for African descended-people, which in some ways can serve as a companion discourse to the canonical stories of Christianity. One must acknowledge the risk in the telling: those who could pass the tale on may also to face community censure or scorn. Thus, the very act of telling itself can be seen as heroic. Central to Morrison's, Marshall aesthetic principles then, is the incorporations and revision of the canonical tales of African American cultural memory. Their revision enables them both to question previously celebrated version of heroism and also to posit other acts - - such as storytelling as heroic.

To cap it all, after my exchanges with the 50 Conjurers and based on my won experience, I can say with no slightest doubt that, spirituality a man can fly and even walk on water. It is part of the folklore of African daily life. It is not rare to hear in Africa that - - such man or such woman escape death by disappearing during a car's accident or any danger. It is true that, on the one hand, Westerners have to be blamed for denying Africans scientists the capacity of doing something great; on the other hand, Africans have to be condemned for keeping secret their know-how and knowledge. In this era of globalization all people contribution matters. Africans does not need strong men anymore, but strong Institutions. With those strong Institutions Africans can make great things to the world. Yes, Africans can. Supposing, Africans traditional doctors decided to put their know-how and knowledge together, so that they can design a special plane made in Africa, and coin antidote to escape any dangers what might our world looks like? Everybody cannot afford a travelling ticket abroad. Each year millions of our francs are invested in Africans' officials travelling abroad. So, by using this African gift--I mean travelling without a European plane and visa will be economical. This is time for Africa to stand up and be counted.

I strongly urge Africans Leaders to do something in favor of promoting the made in Africa.

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