



## Quest, Identity, and Cultural Memory in *Song of Solomon* and *The Magic of the Lost Temple*

M.RUBITHA

Assistant Professor of English

Dharmamurthi Rao Bahadur Calavala Cunnan Chetty's Hindu College  
Chennai

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### Abstract

This paper presents a comparative study of Milkman Dead in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Noonie in Sudha Murty's *The Magic of the Lost Temple*, exploring identity formation via the quest narrative in postcolonial contexts. Drawing on postcolonial theory and cultural memory studies, the analysis examines how individual journeys are shaped by collective history and community values. While Milkman's quest involves recovering a fragmented ancestral past scarred by racial oppression, Noonie's journey emphasizes the ethical preservation of heritage within a supportive intergenerational framework. By juxtaposing Morrison's focus on "recovery" with Murty's focus on "preservation," the study highlights how both authors utilize myth and symbolic spaces to prioritize communal belonging over individual ambition. Ultimately, the paper suggests that these narratives adapt the coming-of-age motif to foreground cultural continuity and a relational model of selfhood.

**Keywords:** Comparative Literature, Postcolonial Bildungsroman, Cultural Memory, Identity Formation, Quest Narrative, Ancestral Heritage, Oral Tradition, Ethical Responsibility, Intergenerational Bonding, Myth and Folklore, Communal Belonging.

### I. Introduction

Toni Morrison was an American novelist, essayist, and Nobel Laureate whose works explore African American history, identity, and cultural memory through myth, oral tradition, and experimental narrative forms. Her fiction foregrounds the psychological impact of slavery and systemic racism on Black communities. *Song of Solomon* is a landmark African American novel that explores identity, ancestry, and cultural memory through the life journey of Milkman Dead. Blending myth, folklore, and history, the novel examines the search for selfhood within the collective experience of the Black community. Sudha Murty is an Indian

author, philanthropist, and social thinker known for her accessible narratives rooted in Indian culture, ethics, and humanistic values. Her writings, particularly for children and young adults, emphasize moral development, intergenerational bonding, and cultural preservation. *The Magic of the Lost Temple* reflects her commitment to reviving respect for heritage through simple yet meaningful storytelling.

Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and Sudha Murty's *The Magic of the Lost Temple* represent to distinct literary traditions: African American literary fiction and Indian children's literature respectively. Yet both center on young protagonists whose journeys function as quests for identity, belonging, and cultural inheritance. Milkman Dead and Noonie undertake physical travels that evolve into spiritual and ethical awakenings, revealing how individual growth is inseparable from collective memory and tradition. This comparison examines how each character negotiates identity, ancestry, and moral responsibility within their cultural contexts.

### The Quest as a Mode of Self-Discovery

Quest is a mode of self-discovery with Milkman Dead and his journey which begins as a selfish pursuit of gold but gradually transforms into a search for ancestral truth. His travels through Pennsylvania and Virginia reconnect him to oral history, folklore, and African American cultural memory, culminating in the realization that "if you surrendered to the air, you could ride it". The quest thus becomes symbolic of liberation through historical awareness. Noonie's journey in *The Magic of the Lost Temple* is motivated by curiosity, reverence, and ethical concern. When she discovers the neglected ancient temple near her grandparents' village, her quest focuses on preservation rather than recovery. Milkman begins alienated from his heritage where as Noonie's journey reinforces values like respect for history, community cooperation, and moral duty, she already embodies. Both Milkman



and Nooni engage in quests that transcend material goals, yet Milkman's journey is corrective, repairing a fractured identity, while Nooni's is affirmative, strengthening an already present moral consciousness.

With respect to relationship to ancestry and cultural memory, Milkman grows up detached from his ancestry, due to his family's materialism and emotional sterility. Morrison emphasizes that historical amnesia leads to spiritual emptiness, and Milkman's maturation depends on learning to listen to elders, legends, and women such as Pilate, who embodies ancestral wisdom. Nooni is raised within a nurturing intergenerational environment. Her grandparents serve as cultural transmitters, and the temple represents India's civilizational continuity. Sudha Murty presents heritage as accessible and communal, emphasizing responsibility rather than loss. Milkman is destined to recover lost ancestry through struggle, whereas Nooni is tasked with protecting inherited culture.

#### **Relationship to Ancestry and Cultural Memory**

Morrison uses myth particularly the motif of flight to situate Milkman within African diasporic storytelling traditions. Flight symbolizes both escape and responsibility, underscoring the tension between freedom and communal obligation (Gates). Sudha Murty employs the temple as a symbol of moral and historical continuity. The "magic" of the lost temple is not supernatural but ethical, deeply rooted in cooperation, honesty, and civic engagement. Both novels use symbolic structures to teach cultural values, yet Morrison's mythmaking is complex and ambivalent, while Sudha Murty's symbolism is didactic and restorative.

Milkman's early life is marked by emotional isolation and patriarchal entitlement. His development requires relinquishing ego and embracing collective identity. By the end of the novel, his leap represents faith in connection rather than dominance. Nooni consistently prioritizes community welfare. Her actions demonstrate that individual initiative gains meaning only when aligned with social good, reinforcing Murty's humanistic philosophy.

Milkman Dead and Nooni represent two models of the literary quest shaped by cultural context. Morrison presents identity as something fragmented by historical violence and recoverable only through deep engagement with collective memory. Murty, conversely, depicts identity as ethically grounded and sustained through preservation of tradition. Together, these characters illustrate how literature across cultures uses the

journey motif to explore the relationship between selfhood, history, and moral responsibility.

#### **The Postcolonial Bildungsroman: Reclaiming History**

Milkman Dead's development exemplifies a postcolonial bildungsroman, shaped by the legacy of slavery and racial capitalism. Initially insulated by privilege yet spiritually impoverished, Milkman exhibits what Fanon describes as the "colonized consciousness", a alienation from history and community. His quest begins as a material pursuit but evolves into an encounter with African American oral traditions, folk songs, and ancestral myths. Through his engagement with cultural memory, particularly the legend of flying Africans, Milkman reconstructs a fragmented self. Morrison positions memory as an act of resistance, aligning with Bhabha's notion of reclaiming cultural narratives from erasure. Milkman's leap at the novel's conclusion signifies not escape but a reconciled self rooted in communal history. Nooni's journey can be read as a subtle postcolonial Bildungsroman in which personal growth is shaped by ethical awareness and cultural responsibility rather than psychological conflict. Her interaction with the forgotten temple highlights the role of cultural memory as a living presence sustained through intergenerational transmission and communal effort. Situated in a postcolonial Indian context, the narrative emphasizes preservation of indigenous heritage in the face of neglect and modernization, presenting maturity as an alignment with collective values rather than individual assertion.

In conclusion, the comparative study of Milkman Dead and Nooni highlights how postcolonial narratives employ the quest motif to explore identity, memory, and cultural responsibility across different cultural contexts. While Milkman's journey reflects a struggle to recover a fragmented ancestral past shaped by historical oppression and Nooni's experience emphasizes the importance of preserving inherited cultural heritage through ethical action and community participation. Both novels underscore that individual growth is deeply connected to ancestral roots, collective memory and social belonging. By situating personal journeys within broader cultural frameworks, Toni Morrison and Sudha Murty demonstrate that postcolonial literature redefines selfhood not as isolated achievement but as a relational process grounded in history, tradition, and communal values.



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