

**The relation between biblical imagery and African-American culture in Toni Morrison's
*Home***

KODJO Agbomoun Henri

Doctorant
Université Alassane Ouattara, Bouaké (Côte d'Ivoire)
Département d'Anglais
kodjohenri@gmail.com

Adama SORO

Enseignant-Chercheur
Maître-Assistant
Université Alassane Ouattara, Bouaké (Côte d'Ivoire)
Département d'Anglais
soroadama@yahoo.fr

SANOKO Bakary

Enseignant-Chercheur
Assistant
Institut National Polytechnique Félix Houphouët-Boigny, Yamoussoukro (Côte d'Ivoire)
Département d'Anglais
bakary_sanoko@inphb.ci

Vamara KONE

Enseignant-Chercheur
Professeur Titulaire
Université Alassane Ouattara, Bouaké (Côte d'Ivoire)
Département d'Anglais
vamarakone2019@gmail.com

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how the biblical imagery used in Toni Morrison's *Home* serves to fashion the black characters' sense of cultural belonging as they grapple with racial segregation. The study rests on Barthes's concepts of signifier/signified, denotation/connotation, which help probe the novel's biblical symbolism, with a view to surfacing its cultural significance. Ultimately, the study reveals that the characters' reinterpretation of some biblical tropes helps inform their perception of community, solidarity, brotherly love, faith and combativeness against racial discrimination.

Keywords: African-American, Bible, culture, fiction, symbolism

Résumé: L'objectif de cet article est de démontrer comment l'imagerie biblique, dans *Home* de Toni Morrison, est utilisée pour façonner le sentiment d'appartenance culturelle des personnages noirs dans un contexte de lutte contre la ségrégation raciale. L'étude s'appuie sur les concepts Barthésiens de signifiant/signifié, de dénotation/connotation, lesquels permettent d'explorer le symbolisme biblique présent dans le roman, en vue d'en dégager la portée culturelle. En définitive, l'étude démontre que la réappropriation de certains tropes bibliques contribue à éclairer la perception qu'ont les personnages noirs de la communauté, la solidarité, l'amour fraternel, la foi, et la résistance contre la ségrégation raciale.

Mots-clés: Afro-américain, Bible, culture, fiction, symbolisme

Introduction

Literature and Religion stand as two interconnected disciplines, the former informing the latter and vice-versa. Sacred books serve as literary records for some religions. Conversely, religion also features as a central theme in many secular works, non-fiction and fiction alike. Stressing the interrelationship between these two areas of knowledge, D. Donoghue (2006, p.31) writes: "the factor common to religion and literature is language." As a sacred book, the Bible is replete with connotative language which has been a source of inspiration for black American Religion and fiction.

Taking the Bible as departure point to discuss black American religion with reference to literature may sound parochial. Indeed, just as Africa is home to a "myriad of [...] religions" (L. W. Levine, p.3), it would be erroneous to reduce black slaves' religious experiences to Christianity alone. These spiritual experiences, encompassing "Islam, Voodoo, Black Judaism" (S. A. Johnson, 2010) and the veneration of ancestors, had a definite impact on the cultural evolution of black slaves and their descendants in America. Nevertheless, for the purpose of this study, the religious framework is narrowed down to Christianity, especially "Afro-Protestantism", (J. Sorett, 2023) a current characterized by its independence vis-à-vis white dominant churches.

The place of Christianity within the African American community has aroused the interest of many scholars. For instance, exploring the implications of cultural trauma in connection with the blacks' legacy of slavery, R. Eyerman (2003) explains how this context of tension paves the way to the formation of an African American Identity. Among the forces that contribute to constructing a strong black identity, Eyerman argues, the Negro church holds a significant position being "a central source of community and identity-formation already during slavery" (2003, p.25) and later. Stressing the same point, E. U. Essien-Udom (1962, p.25) acknowledges that "the Negro church may be regarded as the single institution which has uniquely given a sustained, positive sense of ethnic identity to American Negroes". Besides, defining the black church as a "nation within a nation", F. Frazier (1974) insists on its role as a molder of black identity. Aside from fostering a sense of community-building, the black church — Eyerman writes — distinguishes itself by its activism, seeking to counter the influences of systemic racism.

Shifting the subject onto the literary realm, and more specifically addressing black women writers' interactions with the Bible, K. C. Bassard (2010, p.1) notes: "I was confronted with the range and depth of black women writers' references to the Bible in English. From Phillis Wheatley to Toni Morrison, black women's literature is replete with biblical images, themes, and reverberations." This study aims at digging further into the question of biblical representation in black American fiction

as illustrated in Toni Morrison's *Home*. Set against the backdrop of racial segregation, *Home* traces the identity crises and struggles of major black characters like Frank and his sister, Cee, driven by the need to redefine themselves. These characters sink into trauma when they break away from their local communities. Yet, they achieve healing when they ultimately reconnect with their cultural roots. Thus, reading *Home* from a religious angle helps assess the ways that the Bible relates to these characters' self-assertion. The scope of the study is to show a new perspective from which to explore often unnoticed, or less regarded, areas of black characters' spiritual experiences in the selected novel.

This paper provides an overall perspective on the intricate dynamics between religion and literature, and their implication for identity construction. More specifically, it explores Toni Morrison's utilization of the Bible as a literary text within the narrative of *Home*. This interweaving of biblical themes into the storyline is accomplished through a range of symbols and allusions that call for critical examination.

Instrumental to this study is Barthes's (1964) theory of signifier/signified, denotation/connotation, serving as lens to identify and decode the novel's biblical symbols and analogies in relation to the issue of black identity. As literary devices, the symbols and analogies help bring to the fore the connection between the main story and the underlying biblical narrative. Accordingly, analyzing this figurative language seems appropriate to explore the spiritual universe of the characters, and interrogate the ways in which biblical figures are re-interpreted to illuminate their reclaimed identity.

The study falls into three chapters. Chapter 1 contextualizes the historical interplay between black American culture and the Bible. Chapter 2 explores the biblical symbolism within *Home*, and how it informs characters' lives. Chapter 3 deals with the analogical interplay between some biblical stories and the characters' experiences.

1. An Overview of African-American Culture as Depicted in the Bible

The influence of Christianity represents a cultural heritage for a segment of the black American population. A brief survey of antebellum life within black slave communities help validate the influence of the bible, and the societal transformations induced by its spiritual tenets. In this regard, Chireau explores the correlation between black Christianity and African traditions, arguing that the distinctiveness of the former is partly attributable to its mixture with some aspects of African religious practices. He writes:

The acknowledged presence of "Africanisms" in black American religion, such as the use of rhythm as a liturgical device and performance traditions like the "shout," spiritual dancing and possession, shows the organic connection between African and African American religious cultures (Y. P. Chireau, 2003, p. 36).

This implies that, in addition to sound and dances, blacks' relationship to the Bible - or biblical practices - was fashioned by the incorporation of elements like conjure or magic. Chireau (2003, p.33) sums up the idea by contending that "in the eyes of many blacks, these supernatural traditions were the bridge that connected the spiritual heritage of the ancestors with the adopted traditions of North America." In other words, the Bible was viewed through the lens of African traditions. Yet, North American realities have also shaped the blacks' representation of the Bible.

Thus, before the Emancipation Proclamation issued by Abraham Lincoln in 1863, K. C. Bassard (2010, p. 34) observes that there were two competing views relative to the defense or not of slavery based on the interpretation of biblical texts. Simply put, Christian slaveholders advocated the idea that the Bible sanctions the practice of slavery while abolitionists took an opposite stand. K. C. Bassard (2010, p.34) notes that “the compromise and concessions to the slave system derived from a theology that separated the slave’s body from his or her soul”. Otherwise stated, the upholders of this stance suggested that salvation only concerns the soul, and not the body, validating thereby the economic exploitation of the slave manpower. In contrast, black slaves understood that the Bible could be interpreted differently, and subsequently, might be turned into “a text of black agency and revolution” (K. C. Bassard, 2010, p. 35). Thus, the Bible was at the heart of the blacks’ struggle for freedom.

To them, being able to read the Bible like their white masters, meant freedom, that is to say, tapping into a power long denied to them. In a sense, the Bible came to play a central role in black slaves’ consciousness, crystallizing their dream of freedom. In the same vein, K.C. Bassard (2010, p.36) writes:

As Cornelius summarizes; ‘Black Christians believed the Bible spoke to them in a special way, and they resented the slaveholders’ abuse of God’s word. Therefore, it was crucial that some people in the slave community gain reading skills, ‘to take the Bible back’, to read what it really said.

Therefore, the goal of black literacy was to make blacks able to read the Bible, and strip it, liberate it from its cloak of racialized proslavery assumptions with a view to reaching a more humane, a truer black interpretation of its message. On this point, A. J. Raboteau (2004, p. 264) compellingly observes:

Images of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation filled the hymns and spirituals which the slaves sang in church, in the fields, and in the quarters. Themes and events from the Old and New Testaments were used by the slaves to interpret their own experience by measuring it against a wider system of meaning. Simultaneously, the biblical symbols were translated in the light of the slaves’ own day-to-day experiences.

Thus, the teachings from the Bible offered black slaves a system of signification which helped them reconstruct their worldview. Drawing from this tradition, some black women writers focus their works on subverting white racist myths by replacing them with “a new mythology rooted in the black experience” (T.L. Walters, 2007, p.12). From this angle, Morrison’s *Home* may be read as an attempt to rewrite some of the biblical stories, making them recount black cultural experience.

Toni Morrison once said - relative to her relationship to the Bible -: that it “wasn’t part of my reading, it was part of my life.” (D. Taylor-Guthrie, 1994) Morrison’s *Home* - a black fiction replete with bible symbolism and innuendos - stands as a perfect illustration of Walters’s above quote. Though the narrative is set in the 1950s segregated America, the exploration of biblical imagery shows an evident link with antebellum blacks’ spiritual experience, or as A. J. Raboteau (1999, p.123) puts it, a “continuity within change”.

2. The Significance of Biblical Symbols in Toni Morrison's *Home*

In Morrison's *Home*, biblical symbols are very significant as a literary explanation of the images of Reverend Locke and the Sweet Bay Tree may be enlightening.

2.1. Reverend Locke: Typifying a Black Christ

In the narrative, characterization is symbolically used to allude to spiritual truths or religious beliefs. For instance, Reverend Locke is depicted as the embodiment of a kind of black Christ, that is, a Christ whose actions are anchored in the black community's existential needs. A cluster of biblical allusions revolves around the symbolism of the religious character stressing thereby his function and meaning in the narrative.

The emphasis laid upon the insignificant size of Locke's place –pictured as a “tiny church” named “AME ZION” (*Home*, p.9) - is reminiscent of Christ's teaching that wide is the path that leads to loss, and narrow the path which leads to life. The smallness of the church, however, does not mislead Frank since he has the ability to discern the presence and significance of Zion, i.e. of the narrow path. Indeed, on his way to the nuthouse, Frank decides that when he escapes, he will go “to Zion” (*Home*, p.9). As an African American, the protagonist's reaction shows that “Zion”- as a sign - refers to something deeper in his imagination. Frank's consciousness has been nurtured by, and soaked into black theological symbolism which is passed down from generation to generation as a cultural legacy. In the biblical imagination, Zion recalls the nation of Israel, and by extension God's dwelling place. Placed into the African American context, Zion signifies a spiritual, a virtual place of refuge where distressed blacks can find solace, hope and redemption. Therefore, the pastor of AME Zion, Reverend Locke stands as a Christ-like figure, the good shepherd seeking to redeem lost sheep. Enlightening the prophetic role of Locke, the narrator writes:

He instructed Frank to get in touch with a Reverend Jessie Maynard, pastor of a Baptist church, and that he would call ahead and tell him to look out for another one. “Another one?”
“Well, you not the first by a long shot. [...]. You all go fight, come back, they treat you like dogs. Change that. They treat dogs better.” (*Home*, p.18)

Referring to Frank as “another one” suggests that the church leader is committed to rescuing his brethren, and has been doing it as a regular activity for some time. Locke's commitment signals that the post-bellum black church is not only interested in spiritual matters but also in fighting socio-political evils as testified by his remarkable statement that “an integrated army is integrated misery” (*Home*, p.18). Reference to Reverend Jessie Maynard, another pastor, calls to mind the image of a religious chain of brotherhood. This community of brethren is dedicated to resisting racial segregation by providing help to the victims thereof. Locke's role, from a scriptural standpoint, can be read as Christ offering Frank a shelter. Also, the symbolic conflation of Locke with Christ illuminates the former's function as a provider of mystical empowerment. Such a spiritual sustenance is metaphorised by the pastor's wife as she offers Frank “six sandwiches, some cheese, some bologna, and three oranges.” (*Home*, p.18) In other words, assisting Frank with this physical food parallels the spiritual and emotional strength that is imparted to him through his short stay at the church thanks to Locke's agency.

Another element that highlights Locke's commitment resides in the type of language he uses. The style of the direct speech - used to voice the pastor's thoughts – reveals a vernacular language

sometimes characterized by a non-standard English syntax and grammar: “They must have thought you was dangerous. If you was just sick they’d never let you in. Where exactly you headed, brother?” (*Home*, p.13) Because it is a distinctive cultural trait, the churchman’s particular linguistic expression is an indirect indication of his blackness. Put another way, colloquialism serves to articulate the bond that unites black theology and black culture. Besides, calling Frank “Brother” (*Home*, p.14) denotes brotherly love, a feeling that helps blacks to connect, and be shaped into a large spiritual family. From this angle, unconditional love works as an energizing force that contrasts with the pervasive racist hate, and helps blacks combat the effects thereof.

The pastor’s Christian name “John” is an additional factor that accentuates the notion of love. Indeed, “John” echoes one of Christ’s apostles whose eponymous gospel centers on divine and brotherly love. As a result, the name of John has come to connote love. Similarly, Pastor John epitomizes love. Prophetic or symbolic names are part and parcel of biblical tradition, which seems to inform Morrison’s technique of characterization. Such names capture - as it is the case in *Home* - the characters’ moral traits.

The character of John Locke - who appears only a short time in the narrative - is nevertheless of a great significance and complexity, being loaded with multiple symbolic meanings. He stands as a representation of Jesus, an embodiment of love, a preacher rooted in the black culture of resistance to social injustices. Morrison carves a character who admirably exemplifies the combativeness of black church in a context of racial segregation, and the thriving of a theology which amplifies the voice of black cultural identity.

The notion of combativeness is also mirrored through the symbolism of natural elements like trees, which enrich the narrative by disclosing underlying spiritual truths. For instance, the sweet bay tree – in the piece - is a fascinating symbol of the Cross, which in turn connotes resilience, sacrifice and resurrection.

2.2. The Sweet Bay Tree: An Allusion to the Cross

The narrator depicts the tree as “split down the middle, beheaded, undead—spreading its arms, one to the right, one to the left”. (*Home*, p.144) The vivid portrayal of this atypical tree creates a mental picture that evokes the perpendicular contours of a cross: the vertical trunk and the horizontal “arms”.

In the context of racial segregation, the symbol of the cross – viewed as an instrument of torture - lays bare the iniquities of a nation that sanctions and condones the brutal assassination of innocent black people. The ghastly lynching of Crawford (*Home*, p.10) stands as a sad reminder of the whites’ excesses. In a sort of irony, the evocation of the cross serves to unmask the paradox, shame and guilt of an alleged Christian nation that is responsible for unspeakable violence. Yet, the tree-cross also carries positive meanings as testified by the narrator’s diction: “beheaded, undead” (*Home*, p.144), “hurt ... alive and well (*Home*, p.147). One observes that the contrast in the word choice serves to indicate that oppression is resisted and defeated. Viewed from this angle, the tree-cross embodies resistance, resilience and more importantly resurrection.

The concept of resurrection is made visible through the exhumation of the remains of Jerome’s father, the unknown man killed and hastily and improperly buried in the opening scene of the novel. Later, Frank learns about the circumstances of the man’s death: he died so that his son might get

a chance to live (*Home*, p.139). The act of re-burying him next to the sweet bay tree can be interpreted as an attempt to praise the man's boldness and self-sacrifice. Sacrificial love fits well with the image of the cross, hence the choice of the location for the burial: "Quickly they found the sweet bay tree—There at its base Frank placed the bone-filled quilt that was first a shroud, now a coffin. Cee handed him the shovel." (*Home*, p.144) Thus, the tree becomes a memorial that helps commemorate the heroism of black fighters of the past, and by extension, celebrate the valor of ancestors. The ritual performance – a reminiscence of the African worship of ancestors - merges into religious symbolism to create a syncretic mixture in which the dead man is given a chance to live again through the mediation of memory.

Digging a hole to bury Jerome's father proves strenuous because, the narrator explains, "the sweet bay roots resisted disturbance and fought back." (*Home*, p. 144) Thus, the tree is figuratively given human characteristics of confrontation. The notion of resilience manifests itself through the tree's persistent life despite its being "beheaded". After the re-burial ceremony, Frank recounts:

I stood there a long while, staring at that tree.
It looked so strong
So beautiful.
Hurt right down the middle
But alive and well. (*Home*, p.147)

The reader's attention is caught by the rhythmical shape and sonority of Frank's utterance. This literary technique helps articulate the young man's profound fascination relative to the amazing virtues of the tree. Actually, the protagonist and the tree are brought close to each other, and made to coalesce in a sort of mystical fusion. In other words, the tree becomes a reflection of Frank himself, echoing his resistance, resilience and figurative resurrection.

In fact, aligning with the burial performance, the above lyrical quotation is meant to pay homage to black cultural roots that remain "alive and well" despite the repeated attempts to destroy them. The image of the cross-like tree captures a segment of the African American history marked – before and after the Emancipation - by suffering, self-sacrifice and resilience.

All things considered, the studied symbols allow to delve into the characters' universe, and see that spirituality – acting as a cultural cement – leads to strengthening their bonds of solidarity, unity, and sense of resistance. In addition to symbols, the novel is embedded with some analogies that help connect the plot with some key biblical events or stories.

3. Biblical Analogies in *Home*

In Toni Morrison's *Home*, significant biblical analogies are made through acts and facts such as Frank's Experience, Cee's Liberation from Dr. Beau's House and the Garden of Ethel.

3.1. Frank's Experience: An Echo of the Parable of the Prodigal Son

Frank's journey is a subtle reminder of the biblical Parable of the Prodigal Son. It allows to deepen reflection, especially about the Frank's inner personality. In the Bible, the Parable of the Prodigal Son relates the story of a young man who demands his share of the legacy, and breaks away from his father's house. He goes on a long journey where he wastes all his legacy. Now, destitute and

miserable, he makes up his mind to return home in order to request his father's forgiveness. The loving father welcomes his repentant son, and organizes a family party to rejoice for the "resurrection" of his son.

Striking are the parable's similarities with Frank's return from the Korean War after his being through a lot of misfortunes. Indeed, he has lost his friends, slaughtered in horrible circumstances, and as a consequence, suffers from a traumatic disease. This disease itself stands as a metaphoric picture that captures the biblical tenet that death is the wages of sin. In other words, breaking ties with the community is construed as a transgression that results in divine curse. From this standpoint, only reconnection with one's community, that is, with one's cultural bonds, can unravel the curse, and blot out the stigma. This is admirably reflected by Frank's return to Lotus, and his subsequent healing. The breaking of communal ties, suffering, repentance and reconciliation constitute the common features that tie Frank and the Prodigal son's stories.

Besides, the idea of homecoming is reinforced by the circular trajectory of the narrative as Morrison has the story of *Home* end where it begins, artfully connecting the beginning with the denouement. By making the mood of the closing scene happier than the one of the opening scary scene, the author emphasizes the beauty of homecoming and its soothing and healing effect. The happy ending of Frank's story matches the joy of the prodigal son's family welcoming.

Essential on the path to healing are confession and repentance, two biblical motifs that run through both stories, showing up in the actions of both protagonists: Frank and the prodigal son.

The passage below tells of Frank's confession as he no longer seeks to evade responsibility and truth, no matter how painful and shameful this may be:

I shot the Korean girl in her face.
I am the one she touched.
I am the one who saw her smile.
I am the one she said "Yum-yum" to.
I am the one she aroused. (*Home*, p.133)

The above quotation is fashioned in the form of an anaphora (reiteration of "I am the one") which suggests musicality and rhythm, cultural aspects of black culture. Though this literary device helps introduce variety in the narrative form, it above all shows how auditory imagery and religious acts come to be interlaced, the former serving to articulate the latter. In the case in point, Frank's confession is narrated in a musical fashion which helps emphasize the emotional dimension of the character's action. Put differently, the suggested rhythmic structure indicates a form of soul expression, adding a tinge of spirituality and depth to the character's performance.

Besides, the repetition of the personal pronoun "I" bespeaks insistence on individual responsibility, that is to say, the refusal to blame others for one's misfortunes. The protagonist demonstrates uncommon wisdom, courage and humility in this declaration of guilt. This instance marks a major turning point in Frank's spiritual direction, and the climax in the narrative. From this moment on - realizing and declaring his failure and spiritual misery - he starts his spiritual journey back home. Hence, the title of the novel that suggests - from a spiritual vantage point - reconciliation with oneself, and reconnection with one's community. The title also calls to mind an imaginary place - both individual and collective - where the character can find solace and healing. Ultimately, the title

connects blacks' imagination to the trope of The Promised Land whose symbolic value merges with that of Lotus, Frank's hometown.

From another perspective, Frank's experience, i.e. his flight from, and return to Lotus, suggests a re-writing, a re-interpretation of the original biblical parable. The African American re-reading of the parable allows the reader to assess the extent to which cultural or communal ties are pivotal to the spiritual and psychological (re) construction of black individuals. Paralleling the biblical allegory, the story of Frank teaches lessons of black unity and solidarity, thereby sounding like a warning against the temptations of disunity, or estrangement.

Another valuable lesson taught by the story is that, symbolizing an internal journey, it invites blacks to seek purity of the soul. From this angle, Frank's experience amounts to exploring the human heart, and throwing light on the darkness thereof, that is to say, exposing its bent to evil and also the need for purification. The cleansing of the heart, Frank shows, is attainable by courageously facing and telling the truth. He eventually understands that for homecoming to be successful, he needs to open up his heart which calls to mind the metaphoric house "whose night keeps out the light" mentioned in the novel's poetic epigraph. In his act of confession, Frank lets the light of truth penetrate into his heart to dispel the night of lie. The protagonist's declaration that he "has to tell the whole truth" (*Home*, p.133) perfectly illustrates his determination for transparency.

More importantly, Morrison suggests that true darkness is found in the heart, not on the skin. Therefore, for light to prevail over darkness, sin must first be confessed, truth must be told. The writer artfully weaves together the biblical trope relative to the battle of light versus darkness and Frank's struggles against his own lies.

Thus, the narrative raises ethical issues, and paints Blacks as subjects defying the demeaning white stereotypes suggesting that blacks are malevolent. This shows, as a consequence, that the black community is concerned with questions of morality, which contrasts with the white society exemplified by Dr. Beau, whose immoral actions lay bare the wickedness of the white man's heart. From this angle, the issue of evil/good may be seen not as a matter of whites/blacks but as a criticism of the human heart itself. Put differently, the Frank/Dr. Beau contrast shows that the human mind is sick, the color of the skin notwithstanding, and it is man's responsibility to seek redemption. Frank succeeds while Dr. Beau fails. This shows that the black community is spiritually trained to keep a good heart. Cowardice, lies, revenge and hatred must be banned from the blacks' heart so that they may successfully withstand the trauma of racism.

All in all, the biblical motifs of confession and communal reconnection - embedded in the stories of Frank and the prodigal son - help light up complex aspects relative to black identity construction interlaced with spiritual and ethical issues.

3.2. Cee's Liberation from Dr. Beau's House: An Image of the Exodus

A key biblical figure, the Exodus holds a significant place in African American literary aesthetics. It appears in *Home* through Cee's experience in Dr. Beau's house. The ancient biblical narrative of the Exodus paints the suffering of God's people suffers at the hands of Pharaoh in Egypt, and their deliverance from bondage. This biblical event is re-contextualized to signify deliverance from Dr. Beau's house.

Indeed, the doctor is a metaphorical representation of Pharaoh as he exploits the young black woman's body for selfish interests. In this respect Ethel's words are enlightening: 'Don't let [...] no devil doctor decide who you are. That's slavery.' (*Home*, p.126) Referring to Dr. Beau as a "devil doctor" helps turn the scientist into the incarnation of an evil spirit, much like the biblical Pharaoh. This is reinforced by the ironical effect produced by the doctor's name "Beauregard" which highlights the man's seductive and cynical dimensions.

Miss Ethel goes further to describe Cee's submissiveness to the doctor as "slavery". Thus, the medical house stands as a reflection of old biblical Egypt, the land of captivity. The analogy between the two settings highlights the ways in which Afro-Americans' religious background fashions their perception of racist medical science like Eugenics.

Like Ethel, Sarah – Beauregard's maid – is pictured as an intelligent woman, aware of the doctor's evil deeds. She is the one who writes the letter to inform Frank of his sister's condition, made worse by the doctor's medical practices. Besides, as the narrator observes, she obviously sides with Frank against the doctor as he penetrates into the house to save his sister:

The doctor dropped the gun and ran around the desk, past the intruder and up the stairs. "Sarah!" he shouted. "Call the police, woman! Did you let him in here?" Dr. Beau then ran down the hallway, to where another telephone sat on a small table. Standing next to it was Sarah, her hand pressed firmly on the cradle. There was no mistaking her purpose. (*Home*, p.111)

Black coalition is essential to break the yoke of bondage. The narrator's following observation helps explore the doctor's mind: "The doctor raised the gun and pointed it at what in his fear ought to have been flaring nostrils, foaming lips, and the red rimmed eyes of a savage. Instead he saw the quiet, even serene, face of a man not to be fooled with". (*Home*, p.111) The doctor's reaction reveals a contradiction between his assumptions and reality. In other words, Frank's quietness and gravity counter the doctor's racist and stereotypical beliefs about blacks. Roles are reversed, dismantling white social expectations. Put differently, the white doctor seems helpless, and stripped of his authority while the black protagonist displays greater self-confidence and willpower. The doctor's misapprehension of blacks' realities is brought to light as his expectations are proved wrong: "As Frank passed around them with his motionless burden, Dr. Beau cast him a look of anger-shaded relief. No theft. No violence. No harm." (*Home*, p.112).

Furthermore, both male characters view Cee differently: while Frank cherishes his sister, the doctor thinks she is just "an employee he could easily replace" (*Home*, p.112). This difference of appreciation unmasks the wickedness of Dr. Beauregard, illustrating thereby how racism may distort human perception of surrounding realities.

Frank's action demonstrates his heroism as he breaks into white space, challenging conventional norms. In a sense, every blacks' escape from an oppressive space – both physical and emotional - calls to mind the figure of the Exodus. This biblical image fuels blacks' imagination and faith, rooted in the belief that any enterprise of liberation is backed by God. This is justified by Sarah's following thoughts when Frank shows up at Beau's house: "Thank God. Exactly the way old folks said: not when you call Him; not when you want Him; only when you need Him and right on time." (*Home*, p. 113) This quote stresses the fact that religious belief serves as a bond between generations, acting as an identity point of reference.

In the context of racial segregation, religious faith – in particular – the trope of the Exodus stands as a source of cultural empowerment for the construction of a black identity resolutely turned towards freedom.

3.3. The Garden of Ethel: Connections with the Garden of Eden

Imagery related to the agricultural universe reminds the reader of blacks' daily life in white slaveholders' plantations. Thus, Morrison uses a historical and black cultural symbol – the garden – in order to address issues of female self-determination. She operates a subtle comparison between the garden of Ethel and the Garden of Eden. Let us notice the parallelism of form and sound between “Ethel” and “Eden”, which emphasizes their analogy. Yet, as suggested by the narrator, Ethel’s “garden was not Eden; it was so much more than that.” (*Home*, p.130) This suggestion implies a disruption in the correspondence between the two gardens, an unequal parallelism reinforced by the comparison of superiority signaled by the structure “more than”.

The statement that “her garden was not Eden” carries a provocative tone for it denotes a repudiation of the biblical narrative of the Garden of Eden. Though Eden – in the biblical creation story – calls to mind an era of bliss and innocence, it nevertheless naturalizes the woman’s guilt by blaming her for the fall of mankind, for the loss of Paradise. Morrison re-creates the tale of Eve’s seduction by the Snake through the story of Cee’s unfortunate encounter with Dr. Beau. Yet, Cee’s redemption ultimately serves to re-assess the biblical narrative, and reclaim the woman’s dignity. The female attempt at re-conquering the lost paradise appears with more clarity in the representation of the garden of Ethel. By emphasizing the garden’s superiority over Eden, the narrator points to a re-writing of the woman’s story which results in conflating the figures of Eve and Ethel. In this sense, Miss Ethel assumes the function of the new Eve, an “aggressive gardener” (*Home*, p.130) contrasting with the disempowered, misogynistic portrayal of the biblical Eve.

The narrator lyrically describes Miss Ethel’s garden as a protected space, a battlefield where she deploys her authority:

Miss Ethel blocked or destroyed enemies and nurtured plants. Slugs curled and died under vinegar seasoned water. Bold, confident raccoons cried and ran away when their tender feet touched crushed newspaper or chicken wire placed around plants. Cornstalks safe from skunks slept in peace under paper bags. Under her care pole beans curved, then straightened to advertise their readiness. Strawberry tendrils wandered, their royal-scarlet berries shining in morning rain. Honeybees gathered to salute Illicium and drink the juice. (*Home*, p.130)

Standing as a foil to Miss Ethel, the archetypal character of Eve denotes traits of naivety, blameworthiness and subservience which starkly contrast with the former’s virtues of vigilance, fighting spirit and assertiveness. Indeed, Miss Ethel’s garden exemplifies a form of reclaimed paradise. It is, as the narrator notices, targeted and threatened by “the whole predatory world” which competes “with its nourishment, its beauty, its benefits, and its demands.” (*Home*, p.130) Put another way, Morrison thus metaphorizes the whole of American racist society that tries to thwart black cultural blossoming.

Besides, from a more feminist stance, the garden portends black womanhood, manifesting through her ability to create, and safeguard life. Otherwise stated, Miss Ethel views her plants as her own virtual progeny, her creation, and a reverberation of her own worth. Ethel’s gardening also bespeaks the virtue of hard work, thus subverting the stereotypes of black female laziness and

idleness. The garden delineates an imaginary space where the black woman can find psychological sustenance and refuge against the dangerous outer world.

As the agricultural activity induces a transformation of the land, a beautifying of the landscape, it also connotes an emotional belonging or rootedness to the land. In other words, Ethel's gardening activity bespeaks the participation of black women in the cultural construction of their self-identity, of American culture as a whole, and by extension, the proclamation of their belonging to America as their homeland.

In fine, Morrison's re-reading of the archetype of Eve – through its correlation with Ethel – articulates black females' recovered voice, and their eagerness to keep their identity unscathed.

From all these, it follows that the analogical correlations of Morrison's novel and the Bible bespeak the strong link between literature and religion. Underscoring the significance of this relationship on individual and society, V. Koné (2020, p.201) writes "Literature and religion contribute to informing people spiritually and intellectually". Information requires the use of a language of connotations. Thus, Morrison's *Home* and the Bible are similar and different in their use of connotative language.

Conclusion

This article is a reflection on the impact of religion, namely Christianity, on the construction and assertion of black American identity within the framework of racial segregation. It is an attempt at digging further into black women writers' devotion to biblical allusions in their work. Taking Morrison's *Home* as point of anchorage, the study has sought to determine the significance of bible imagery, and its impact on the characters' cultural identity. Relying on the deciphering of biblical symbolism, allusions and analogies, the study has surfaced the characters' ingenuity in re-interpreting their religious faith. In so doing, they have been able to find guidance in a racialized world that strives to blur black cultural landmarks.

Morrison's artfulness has been brought to the fore through the refined, sometimes lyrical, use of biblical motifs and suggestions ingrained in the main narrative's tapestry, thereby adding intertextual layers of spirituality. The writer's re-working of the biblical narrative, the study has shown, helps unveil how home – both community and the cultural past – comes to be a healing locus for broken black individuals. The authorial and narrative voices intermingle to give the storyline the contours of a Christian sermon, or a cautionary tale. The literary recourse to spiritual elements reflects the broader historical role played by black theology in keeping blacks united against cultural erasure. Toni Morrison's creative approach to biblical imagery and African-American culture enlightens about the relationship between literature and religion.

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