

Studies on Toni Morrison's *Beloved* From the Cultural Perspective

LI Zhigang^{[a],*}

^[a]Huai'an Vocational College of Information Technology, Huai'an, China.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

Toni Morrison is the history of American literature and the first African-American woman writer to win the Nobel Prize for literature. So far, Morrison has written nine novels, in which she continued to pay attention to the historical destiny of black people and their spirit world. As a black woman writer's unique identity, she paid special attention to the fate of black women. *Beloved* is Toni Morrison's fifth works, which was published in 1987 in the United States. Its publication brought strong social shock and numerous literary critics and scholars to evaluate her works from different angles in a variety of literary theory. Through careful reading of the text, this paper tried to study this novel from the cultural perspective, which provides a new direction for the readers to study Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. At the same time, readers and critics can better study Morrison's literary works and her superb writing skills.

Key words: Toni Morrison; *Beloved*; The mainstream culture; Black culture

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INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison (1931-), a famous African American writer, won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. Then she became the first African American woman to get this world Prize in Literature. She was born in a black

working-class family and there were four children in her family and she was the second. She was interested in literature when she was young. She finished studying humanities at Howard University and Cornell University. She then completed her studies at the University of Southern Texas, Howard University, and Yale University, and later served as chairman at Princeton University in 1989. She also acts as editor of Random House. She gave a lot of public lectures as a critic. She was particularly good at talking about African-American literature. In fact, Toni Morrison's writing career originated from her failed marriage. In 1958, she married Harold Morrison who was an architect from Jamaica. But their marriage only lasted for 6 years. While this period Morrison gave birth to two sons. They divorced six years later. In order to spend this period of hard life she moved to New York in which she found a job as an editor at Random House. After her divorce, life was unusually hard. In order to relieve the suffering of her unfortunate marriage, she began working on her first novel *The Bluest Eye*, which was published in 1970. Due to her outstanding writing technique, she received wide attention both from the critics and some literature scholars. She continued writing, and then she published her second novel *Sula* in 1974. Due to this novel Morrison received the nomination of the national book award. In 1977, Toni Morrison won the national book critics award for her third book, *Song of S Solomon*. Then she went on with her other works. *Tar Boy* was published in 1981. *Beloved* was published in 1987, and this book was considered as her representative work. *Jazz* was published in 1992 and *Paradise* in 1998, and *Love* in 2003, *A Mercy* in 2008. Her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, is the criticism of the slogan of black is beautiful, and in her latest novel *Love*, we can review the civil rights movement of the 1960s from the female perspective. *A Mercy* shares with *Beloved* the themes of a mother's love for her daughter in a society where this love can only be expressed in an unmerciful way, as well as the

theme of rememory of a past too painful to remember. *A Mercy* received enthusiastic reviews from the critics and readers, and shortly after its publication, was elected as one of The 10 Best Books of 2008 by New York Times Book Review.

Beloved is Toni Morrison's fifth novel. Among all her works, her fifth novel *Beloved* is considered the best and most popular. At the same time, it was this novel that made Morrison get such prizes as Pulitzer Prize in 1988 and Robert F. Kennedy Award. *Beloved* is considered as Toni Morrison's best and her representative work. Some critics came to a conclusion in the Los Angeles Times Book Review, "this novel belongs to the highest level of American literature, even other works have to be squeezed out" Therefore, the critics circle have given very high evaluation on this book. *Beloved* has therefore become the focus of black American literature. *Beloved* was written in the reconstruction time of 1873. This novel focused on the memory and historical power. For some slaves who got freedom now, they can not walk out of the shadow of the past. Past is a horrible memory that they cannot forget. However, for the protagonist Sethe, the memory of the past is not easy for her to forget, too. They went on to torture her with the spirit of her dead daughter. The main story is like this. Eighteen years ago, Sethe had killed her daughter when the slave owner caught up with her because she would not like her daughter to repeat her fate as a slave. As a matter of fact, Morrison borrowed the incident from the true history of Margaret Garner, like Sethe, escaping slavery in Kentucky, then she murdered her child when the owner caught her. *Beloved* followed the relationship between the novel and history.

Morrison is a dual cultural identity as a writer, first of all, she was born in a rich culture and African American black family. Grandparents and parents have a great influence on the growth of Morrison. Second, Morrison has received formal higher education in the United States. The classic books the Bible is also of a great influence on Morrison's creation. In her novel, she used its own unique way to imitatively write the Bible, which made her novel add a lot of mystery and historical connotation. At the same time, some black culture elements also can be found in her novel. By the above analysis, we can see that because of the special identity of the author, it makes her work also has the dual cultural characteristics. This article is from the cultural perspective to study Morrison's *Beloved*, which is a new angle to study the novel in order to better appreciate the world literary classic.

1. THE MAINSTREAM CULTURE EMBODIED IN BELOVED

Morrison is one of the world literary masters. From an early age, she disseminated by the mainstream American

culture, therefore, her writing clearly reflected the influence of mainstream culture. First of all, the Bible is very obvious effects on Morrison's creation. In the fiction, Morrison uses the names of characters in the Bible to name the characters of her novel. Therefore Morrison has cleverly explained that this is the African American respects American culture and this is a clever use of the Bible (Zeng, 2010).

Beloved is the main character of this novel. In fact this name comes from the ninth chapter of Bible—Romans: "I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which not Beloved." Sethe, another character of this novel, *Beloved's* mother, in the preacher's pray heard a clear name *Beloved* on the funeral, so she decided to give her little murdered daughter *Beloved*. Though the girl got a lovely name *Beloved*, she was killed by her own mother. She did not get any love from her mother. Morrison used a fine example to describe Bible had a great influence on African Americans' life. The Bible has influenced all aspects of people's lives, even names (Zhang, 2009).

Morrison is also very good at using the Bible allusions to promote the development of the plot and deepen the theme, which left a deep impression on the readers. In the Bible, there is a great flood and Noah's ark story. These plots also can be found in the *Beloved* which to a large extent added the mystery of the novel and paved a very clever storyline for the novel. According to the Bible, when the evil of the world are unbearable, God opens the skylight and lets the rain and the flood wash away the evil of mankind, so that the good and devout things will turn out again. Only the righteous son of Noah and his ark of the animals in the blessings of God fortunately survived. In the novel *Beloved*, when the sufferings have been unbearable, a month of heavy rain began to swallow everything and wash away all the signs of life. Heavy rain accidentally brought Paul D and his companions an opportunity to escape from the nightmare of Alfred's prison. Then Paul D got freedom. Like Noah, Paul D survived the rain of destruction and became a black that was liberated (Lü, 2005). Morrison used an fine example of Paul D to copy the Bible plot which increases the mystery of the novel.

Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother in law, is another important character of this novel. She lived in Bluestone Road 124 after she got freedom from the slavery. And all the people in the black community consider her as the spiritual leader, which is similar to Jesus who is a very important character and the spiritual leader of the whites in the Bible. And Baby Suggs becomes "an unchurched preacher, one who visited pulpits and opened her great heart to those who could use it."

In winter and fall, she carried it to AME's and Baptists, Holinesses and Sanctifieds, the Church of the Redeemer and Redeemed. Uncalled, unrobed, unanointed, she let her great heart beat in their presence. When warm weather came, Baby Suggs,

holly, followed by every black man, woman and child who could make it through, took her great heart to the Clearing—a wide open space place cut deep in the woods nobody knew for what at the end of a path known only to deer and whoever cleared the land in the first place. In the heat of every Saturday afternoon, she sat in the clearing while the people waited among the trees. (p.87)

Apparently, Baby Suggs was regarded as the spiritual leader in her black community as Jesus among the white people.

2. BLACK CULTURE EMBODIED IN BELOVED

As an African-American writer, Morrison was born in an African traditional family. This was a big family. There were four children in the family and she was the second. Her grandparents were good at telling them African folk stories. She is greatly influenced by the African traditional cultures. And African traditional cultures entrenched her writings deeply. Therefore, black folk is another important factor that helps Toni Morrison's writing. Therefore, in Morrison's novels, the emergence of ghosts has become a common scene. Morrison seeks to resist the loss of folk tradition that constitutes one of the basic elements of the African-American culture (Zhao, 2011).

First of all, *Beloved* is a story about the ghost. *Beloved* is, first of all, a ghost. She is the baby girl killed by Sethe, her mother. The baby receives her name only after her death. As a ghost, *Beloved* also has the features of a real person. She can eat, can drink, can love. There were some other ghosts in the novel, for example, the souls of the ancestors roaming in the glade; the baby's soul guides to Denver to go out of 124; a strange bridge wandered behind the house. Morrison uses the relationship between the past and present, death and life, spirit and material world. Sethe's mother in law, Baby Suggs, lived together with them until her death eight years ago. Just before the death of Baby Suggs's death, Sethe's two sons, Howard and Buglar, ran away from their home. Sethe believed that they fled because a ghost had haunted their house at 124 Bluestone Road for years. However, Denver loves this spirit and gets along well with this spirit, and everyone of the family believes that ghost is the soul of her dead sister. Apparently, Morrison created a ghost story of a man living with the ghost. But the narrators of the story and the characters of the novel think the event is natural. Morrison creates a ghost world where human beings and the ghosts lived together.

Morrison described the history of black Americans in sharp strokes in *Beloved*, and explored the ghostly life of American slaves under slavery. The novel reveals the black history of African Americans and shows the American black culture in a unique perspective. It inherits and deepens the characteristics of black traditional culture

from the perspective of black women (Zhu, 2010). First, super phenomenon is the remarkable character of African traditional culture. In African traditional culture, only the body no longer exists after death, but its soul still exists, and will affect the people alive. In the novel, Morrison confuses the boundaries between fantasy and reality, and creates a magic world of humans and ghosts coexistence. The central plot of the novel is the story of a ghost of *Beloved*. At the beginning of the novel, there is a little boy in the old house of 124. "124 WAS SPITEFULL". Full of a baby's venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children. For years each put up with the spite in his own way, but by 1873 Sethe and her daughter Denver were its own victims. The grandmother, Baby Suggs, was dead, and the sons Howard and Buglar, had run away by the time they were thirteen years old—as soon as merely looking in a mirror shattered it (that was the signal for Buglar); as soon as two tiny handprints appeared in the cake (that was it for Howard). Neither boy waited to see more:

another kettle full of chickpeas smoking in a heap on the floor; soda crackers crumbled and strewn in a line next to the door sill.... Each one fled at once the moment the house committed what was for him the one insult not to be borne or witnessed as second time. (p.1)

Then a person, in the identity of the 18-year-old girl who named *Beloved*, appeared in front of the Sethe. In the next plot description of the novel, readers can use many identities to interpret *Beloved*, but readers are more likely to interpret the *Beloved* as Sethe's killed daughter. *Beloved*'s appearance is full of mystery, which accords with African mythology and folklore. Morrison uses the image of the ghost to symbolize the past and present, and depicts the magic of the historical picture.

Though it is a astonishing tale, the characters in the novel themselves expressed little or no surprise. Because according to the African traditional eschatology, death proved to be an important stage in the cycle of birth, life, death and rebirth. Once a personal death, they no longer have the body. However, their effectiveness and personality still have an impact on the people and people present. They talk and exchange with the livings. If they are remembered and summoned by their family members, they can even come back from the nether world. (Africans believe in two worlds, one is the world, the other is below), and live together. Therefore, there is no need to be shocked by the meeting between the living people and their ghost family members. Obviously, in *Beloved*, Morrison shows a bizarre world from the very beginning. And in the novel Morrison uses the ghost image to represent the suffering memory of past, and for the people today, it is time for them to reconstruct a new life. They got body freedom, but the most important of all, they need spiral freedom. All the African Americans need help together.

CONCLUSION

In *Beloved*, Morrison did not recount the persecution of black Americans, but rather indirectly described by the story of *Beloved* how the black Americans lived under the shadow of slavery terror. From the novel we can see, Morrison shows the African Americans seek self-identity and respect for themselves. And the pursuit of freedom and equal life is always their dream. It is clear we can not excavate the artistic charm of this novel only from a cultural perspective (Wang, 2006), but through analyzing the reader can well conclude that the structure of this novel is based on culture. *Beloved* is a novel about the history and culture of African American. It explores the physical, emotional and spiritual destruction caused by slavery, which continues to plague even the former slaves of freedom. *Beloved* is an important masterpiece in the history of black American literature. Through the description of the trauma caused by the slavery to the black slaves, the author reproduced an extremely important aspect of American reality. As a first black woman writer, she won the Nobel Prize for Literature in the history of world literature. As a black female writer, Morrison always excavated the theme from history and reality and put forward the "Sixty million and even more" slaves, and warned us that this is an unforgettable story. In the novel, Morrison deftly embodies the traditional culture of Africa, and the combination of these traditions

and mainstream culture, making *Beloved* is a text structure with two cultures. It can not only interpret *Beloved* as the return to the traditional culture of Africa, but also embodies Morrison's efforts to keep his own national culture, while *Beloved* is the imitative writing of the mainstream culture. In short, *Beloved* is the artistic structure of two cultures and double voices.

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