

The Construction of Female Identity in *Beloved* from the Perspective of Post-Colonialism

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Abstract

Beloved is one of the historical trilogy by the African-American writer Toni Morrison. This paper interprets the process of the three black women's self-consciousness awakening and identity construction in *Beloved* from the perspective of post-colonialism by Homi K. Bhabha. Morrison depicts the painful revealing of the disremembered past of black people in *Beloved*. Through the depiction of Sethe as well as other ex-slaves, the novel expresses that only by confronting ghosts and rediscovering history can the characters be able to break down their constructed otherness, and embark on the obtaining of a subjective position.

Keywords: *Beloved*; Homi K. Bhabha; post-colonialism; identity construction.

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INTRODUCTION

1. Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Beloved was published in 1987 and takes place ten years after the Emancipation Proclamation. Although many years have passed, the trauma of slavery is still deeply rooted in the inner world of black people. They are unable to escape from the shackles of painful memories of the past and achieve true freedom. The black generation in the first half of the 19th century experienced slavery and civil war, but eventually won legal freedom. As the first book of Morrison's historical trilogy, *Beloved* tells the complicated and tortuous journey of the black generation.

The novel was inspired by a real historical event. When Morrison published "*The Black Book*" at Random House, he revealed the true story of a slave named Margaret Garner, who escaped from a plantation in Kentucky with her husband, Robert, and their children. He sought refuge in Ohio, but was caught again by slave owners. Shockingly, to save her baby from the oppression of slavery, she murdered her. Still, when the woman was arrested, she seemed calm. The story outlines how slavery brutally trampled upon the minds of black people, destroyed their humanity, and robbed them of a viable identity. The story lingered in Morrison's mind for years. In 1981, she resolved to write her fifth novel, *Beloved*, based on the first book in her historical trilogy. At first, Morrison said, the story could

not be written because of concerns about the sensitivity of the topic. Later, however, she thought it would be a shame that such an attractive story could not be recorded in the halls of art.

Beloved begins in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1873. Since the story is presented in flashback, the thread that runs through the novel is the infanticide that took place eighteen years ago, which divides the novel into two parts, namely during and after slavery, and the climax of the novel. The protagonist, Sethe, is a slave woman who, with her children, in 1855, with only a decade left of legal slavery in the United States, is trying to escape the slave owners of a plantation run by a ruthless man known ironically as "Schoolteacher" or "Sweet Home." To prevent slave owners from retaking her children, Sethe resorted to Margaret Garner's behavior when confronting them: Faced with losing the freedom she had won for her children again, Sethe broke down when the planters forcibly took them back. Rather than condemn her children to the dehumanizing life of servitude she was destined to lead, she chose in desperation to kill her one-year-old daughter, the "crawling already?" Sethe cut his throat with a handsaw. Sethe buried him under the name "Beloved." After the incident, Sethe and her other children and mother-in-law Baby Suggs suffered great trauma and were shunned by the black community. They live in their house, 124 Bluestone Road, haunted by little ghosts. Two sons, Howard and Buglar, escape 124,

terrified by the ghost of their dead sister and their mother, in whom they feel they have no confidence due to the murder. Baby Suggs fell into a state of melancholy, longing only for colors that would ease her pain. Then Baby Suggs dies, leaving only her young daughter Denver and her to continue a lonely life until the arrival of Paul D, a slave who was with Sethe at Sweet Home and suffered from unspeakable memories. Shortly after him, the ghost beloved of the dead baby turns into a real young girl and takes revenge on her mother.

Therefore, the essence of the novel is a story about slaves. However, it is different from the traditional slave novel. The difference between the two is that Morrison reveals the unspeakable history of slavery in *Beloved*, which is lost due to intentional omission or not. In an interview with Danille Taylor, she said, "It is about something that the characters don't want to remember, I don't want to remember, black people don't want to remember, white people won't want to remember...it's national amnesia."

Morrison says her main concern is to "exploring how we learn to live our lives fully and well". Exploring how to live better, much of Morrison's work focuses on issues of self-construction and African American culture. From the perspective of human nature, *Beloved* reveals that the real horror of black enslavement is not so much physical pain as psychological harm, that is, the objectification of black people and the complete destruction of their identity. According to Stuart Hall, identity is formed in the interaction of the self with society and modified in an ongoing dialogue with the world. Hall's argument is valid and meaningful for understanding the identity issue in *Beloved*. As *Beloved* relates, the otherness of white society towards blacks forced slaves to internalize the institution of slavery, thereby rendering some or others powerless to fight tirelessly for the restoration of subjective status after being freed from physical slavery. As Morrison says in the novel, "Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another".

In general, *Beloved* evokes a repressed memory based on the effects of slavery that both whites and blacks intentionally wish to leave behind. This repression and separation from painful memories leads to the process of splitting the self and the other. In this respect, a review of history is essential to the formation of identity, as will be elaborated in the following parts.

2. About the Theory of Post-colonialism

2.1 The Origin of the Theory

The origins of post-colonialism can be traced back to Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, which laid a solid foundation for post-colonial studies decades after its publication. In this book, Fanon combines his own experience as a black man in a white world with a number of psychological theories related to colonial

culture. In addition, he explores some important postcolonial concepts such as race and identity.

Since the 1970s, the field of post-colonial studies has gained prominence. However, the first appearance of the term "postcolonial" was in academic journals in the late 1980s, as a subtitle in the book *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. Since then, the term has been used by literary critics to analyze the various cultural effects of colonization: how European colonialism altered the existence of colonial subjects and altered their cultural identities. In the case of post-colonial literature, it comes from Britain's former colonies in the Caribbean, Africa and India. Most post-colonial writers write in English and focus on common themes such as the struggle for independence, national identity, migration, allegiance and childhood.

2.2 The Definition of the Theory

Stephen Slemon, in his book *Post-colonial Critical Theories*, states that "here is probably no term in literary and critical research that is currently as hotly debated". Although there is much debate about the definition of post-colonialism, it is mainly the study of the interaction between modern European countries and their colonial cultures. Post-colonialism, also known as postcolonial studies or postcolonial theory, deals with the transformation caused by European colonization and the struggle of colonies against the evil of slavery to rebuild their cultural identity.

By World War I, European empires controlled more than eighty-five percent of the rest of the globe and strengthened their rule over the centuries. The sheer scope and duration of European empires, as well as their post-World War II fragmentation, have aroused a great interest in post-colonial literature and criticism in our time.

Post-colonialism is literally the period after colonialism, and postcolonial literature is typically characterized by its opposition to colonialism. As defined by Charles E. Bressler in *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*, post-colonialism is a method of literary analysis with a special focus on English literature written in former colonial countries.

Post-colonialism also includes social, political, economic and cultural practices that stem from opposition to colonialism. In fact, post-colonialism has been applied both to literal interpretations of pre-colonial societies and to the global situation after a period of colonization. At this point, according to some critics, the concept of "postcolonial" as a literary genre and an academic construct may have a meaning entirely independent of a historical moment or period.

2.3 The Focus of the Theory

The post-colonialism is concerned with a number of issues prevalent in societies that have experienced colonization: the impact of colonization on post-colonial history, economies, science and culture, and non-European cultures, especially with regard to the regional writings of former colonial powers; the problem of otherness, and how the colonized countries break the predicament of otherness, seek their own cultural identity and establish their own channels in history; how the knowledge of the colonized people is adjusted to cater to the interests of the colonizers; and how this knowledge system is ignored and destroyed by the emergence of selective systems; and the state of the post-colony in the contemporary economic and cultural context. In addition, the study of post-colonialism also criticizes the Euro-centrism in Western works.

In addition, the focus of postcolonial writing is to present the hybridized phenomenon of postcolonial culture, touching on the complex relationship between European culture and native culture. Since a return to the cultural purity of the pre-colonial era is unlikely, the only way to embrace the hybridity of the post-colonial era and celebrate it is through post-colonial literature.

2.4 The Representatives of the Theory

Apart from Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi K. Bhabha are considered to be the most important theorists in postcolonial studies. In 1988, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak published a famous article, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Her work has greatly influenced colonial historiography and postcolonial studies. In her work, she skillfully combines post-structuralism, deconstruction, Marxism, psychoanalysis and feminism to a consistent theoretical framework. Based on Said's view of the other and the Oriental. Homi K. Bhabha, one of the leading scholars in postcolonial studies, addresses the concerns of the colonized--what of the individual who has been the subject of colonization? *Nation and Narration* (1990) and *The Location of Culture* (1994) are two of Bhabha's best-known works.

2.5 The Concern for Identity Issue of the Theory

The question of identity developed into one of the central interests of postcolonial literature. Recollections of colonialism, multiculturalism, hybridity and the othering that come with it often lead to the colonized's pursuit of their cultural identity. In post-colonial countries, identity is often explained by cultural differences.

Identity involves stating the difference between the dominant culture of the colonists and the submissive indigenous culture. It involves the construction and expression of the cultural identity of colonial communities on the one hand, and the articulation of cultural resistance and attempts at decolonization on the other. Although the colonists had withdrawn from the

colonies, the withdrawal was not complete. They left behind an ingrained culture of colonial European systems of government European systems of education, culture and values that despised morality and valued culture and education and even the appearance of previously colonized peoples. The gradient development of colonization destroyed the cultural identity of the colonized subjects and their civilization system. The long years of colonial rule have made the people a type of cultural hybrid. As a result, the identity of a postcolonial society has undergone a cultural transformation: it has been colonized twice. It was first politically colonized and then invaded by the colonists' civilizations, despite of both rejecting their identification. This dilemma, encountered by all post-colonial societies, is evident in most contemporary writers in former colonies. Morrison's *Beloved* clearly belongs to this category.

This thesis will apply Homi K. Bhabha's views on identity construction from the perspective of post-colonialism.

3. The Awakening Consciousness and Identity Construction of the Characters

3.1 Baby Suggs' Awakening Consciousness and Identity Construction

Baby in *Beloved* acts as a storyteller. She is a keeper of past memories. As an evangelist, she not only represents black ancestors, but is also a cultural and spiritual leader in the black community.

Life as a slave destroyed everything in Baby Suggs' life. In Baby's mind, white people are the worst misfortune in the world. She had had seven children in her life, but she remembered none of them, except that one of them liked to eat burnt bread. Only her youngest son, Halle, stayed with her at Sweet Home. By working outside in his spare time, Halle earned money to buy Baby's "freedom". However, in the novel, although Baby is redeemed, she does not have a sense of existence. The arrival of freedom made her aware of her own identity for the first time in over sixty years. A clear thought came into her head: "These hands belong to me. This is my hand." Filled with gratitude for the freedom that God had given her, Baby used her soul to reach out to the people of the black community. In her sermon at the Glade, she called on people in the black community to cherish the flesh that white people despise: "Love it." It can be seen from this point that Baby has realized the importance of the value of her own body, which also implies that she has embarked on a journey to find the identity of the subject. She tries to awaken the self-love and personality consciousness of black compatriots in the form of a religious ceremony to find the cultural identity and self-identity of black people. But that firstly-built identity was destroyed when she witnessed Sethe kill her granddaughter, Beloved. From then on, Baby had a nervous breakdown and was devastated. She was

bedridden and escaped from the world of color, no longer having any contact with the outside world.

It took Baby all his life to get the initial consciousness of the subject. However, sixty years later, her life was already in the twilight, and the price she had paid was huge and painful. The fate of black women like Baby Suggs under slavery was tragic. In what Mr. Garner, the slave owner, called "sweet home", Baby could not even identify with herself. If Baby's tragic life is the epitome of the slave tragedy of her generation, then the journey of identity construction of black slaves begins from now on. While Baby had only taken the first step toward her own subjectivity, another generation of black women, represented by Sethe, had taken an even bigger step.

3.2 Sethe's Awakening Consciousness and Identity Construction

Sethe, one of the main characters, used to be a timid, gentle, obedient slave. In Sweet Home, she had no ego. She was trapped under the oppression of slavery, but at the same time, she dared to express her love for her family, showing that she did not blindly surrender to slavery and its ideology, but to fight against it. This is the embodiment of Sethe's independent and autonomous subject consciousness. It is ambivalence. As Bhabha points out, the promiscuous nature of colonization creates ambivalence. This ambivalence opens up the possibility for the rebels to overthrow power. In this novel, it is this ambivalence that drives Sethe to get rid of the oppression of slavery, rewrite black history and form a new outlook on life. In fact, it wasn't until she escaped from Sweet Home that Sethe realized her lack of subjectivity as a person. On 124, for the first time, Sethe felt the joy of being completely her own. During the short 28 days, she made friends with members of the black community and enjoyed the happiness and joy of family reunion. She actively tried to move on from slavery, abuse, and torture at the hands of slave owners. She needs to stop being the one whose fate is dictated and decided by others. She wants to be a new self and a person with her sense of subjectivity. However, this state of freedom was soon broken and ceased to exist. Because Sethe murdered Beloved, the entire black community stopped being close to her. Sethe lived solitarily with guilt. Self-seclusion suffocates her emotionally, and the memory of her experiences is cut off in consciousness. But in the construction of Sethe's identity, the murder of Beloved is the beginning of her awakening. She murdered Beloved to demonstrate her protest against slavery that treated blacks as objects to be bought and sold. So she made the most painful choice for any mother: if she could not live free, she preferred that they all die, at least so that they could be free from the slave owner's slavery. Though she had killed "Beloved" because of her mother's love for her daughter, she had killed her own daughter. In the midst of this paradoxical torment, Sethe's ego gradually cracked. Sethe's infanticide is the trigger for the novel.

Because of lifelong otherization and objectification, it is almost impossible for Sethe to construct self-subject. However, the presence of Paul D, the man who escaped from Sweet Home alive, awakened memories she had been holding back for years, and the scenes of the past slowly unfolded before her. Sethe has to face the memories in pain, and this process is not continuous. Therefore, Morrison uses the narrative mode of time and space to show the psychological process of the protagonist's depression and resistance. Freud's theory of trauma explains that facing trauma is the first step toward the future. From this point of view, although Sethe's memories of the process of pain, but it is with the phoenix nirvana process, she slowly picked up the broken self. It could be said that Paul D's arrival helped her to realize her self-identity. He reminded her that she was the best thing in the world and that she was entitled to a better life. Moreover, Beloved's return 18 years later plays a decisive role in establishing Sethe's identity. Only when she realizes how to handle her relationship with Beloved's ghost can she move on from her guilt. Beloved's arrival is a way for Sethe to confront her tragic memories, as she, too, yearns to rebuild the relationship. The past, present and future are an inseparable continuum of historical development. To avoid or deny the past will lead to the loss of self and the loss of the future. Only by recognizing and facing the past can one be purified and reborn from the purgatory of the past.

Sethe's personal development was largely stalled until Beloved's body appeared. She deliberately avoided confrontation with her inner self, which further hindered the formation of her individual subject consciousness. The arrival of Beloved completely changed the state of affairs. The interaction with her daughter slowly led Sethe to recognize the colonized internalized version of herself that she had refused to admit. Because of Beloved, she picked up her broken self.

The novel reveals the pain of black women's inner world, and more importantly, evokes the healthy and autonomous self-consciousness of black women lost in historical trauma. In the end, the black community drove out its favorite. Paul D told Sethe, "You are the most precious thing." But Sethe, mentally and physically broken, asked herself, "Me? Me? " This vague murmuring foretold the possibilities of Sethe's future. The end of the novel leaves the reader in suspense. With the warmth and support of Beloved, Denver, Paul D, and the entire community, the reader has reason to believe that Sethe will eventually achieve the wholeness of her self-subject and find her true self.

3.3 Denver's Awakening Consciousness and Identity Construction

Denver, as the only child Sethe had, represented the future. In the novel, Denver grows from a girl to a woman who is a bridge between Sethe and members of the community. In the early part of the novel, Beloved's

ghost scares off her two brothers, and only Denver stays at 124 with Sethe, which shows that she is strong and has the ability of a black new woman to shoulder responsibility. Denver had very mixed feelings about her mother because she had watched Sethe kill Beloved. She was afraid of her mother, of Beloved's tragedy happening to her, and of the outside world. Under these circumstances, Denver shut herself off completely, refusing to deal with anything outside. The lonely Denver tries to make friends with Beloved's ghost, and spends her pent-up feelings on Beloved with nowhere to release. At this time, she has no ego at all. In fact, Denver gradually develops a sense of self while playing with Beloved's ghost. True self-awareness is found among family members and community. This is also the novel emphasizes that the love of family and community plays an extremely important role in the identity construction of the protagonists.

With the arrival of Paul D, Denver felt that her mother no longer cared about her. She felt that her mother was putting all her energy into Paul D. Denver felt that Paul D was a threat to her. Denver didn't tell Sethe the truth when Paul wanted her to tell her that Beloved's ghost was haunting 124. It was because she had become one with Beloved that she felt as if she existed. So when Beloved's ghost left, she panicked and was afraid. All of which means that the whole Denver, the Denver who has picked up her broken self, must be accompanied and supported by family members. That's why Beloved came back after 18 years. Beloved's return in the flesh is an opportunity for Sethe and Denver to complete their subject consciousness. Eighteen years later, however, Denver bravely stepped out of 124 when she saw Beloved taking everything from Sethe almost madly. A conversation between Denver and Beloved makes the mother-daughter relationship between Sethe and Beloved clear:

"Why do you call yourself Beloved?"

"In the dark my name is Beloved."

"What did you come back for?"

"To see her face."

"Mother's? Sethe?"

"Yes, Sethe's."

In order to save her family from collapse, Denver's sense of self began to sprout. The novel mentions Denver's constant cries that she can no longer live at 124, that she can't go anywhere, that she can't do anything. As she watched Sethe get cornered by Beloved last night, Denver's shame and anger intensified, and her sense of self began to come to itself under the weight of shame. Denver knew it was time to take responsibility for protecting Sethe from Beloved. She decided to go out of the yard and ask someone for help. She began to understand Sethe's plight and realized that only by helping Sethe face the past could she move on to the future. Denver enlisted the help of the entire black community. Throughout the spring, the neighbors brought her various foods from time to time. Later,

Denver found a job again, as well as her confidence and dignity.

Denver was lucky. Her grandmother, Baby Suggs, hid in a corner, unwilling to face her true self, and died in pain. The construction of her mother's identity has not been completed, but she has successfully realized it and become a new generation of black women with dignity and self-subject consciousness. At the end of the novel, Denver is finally out of the dreamlike memories and struggles with Beloved, and her self-consciousness is finally awakened in her once twisted mind. When Paul D saw Denver again, she was thinner, firmer-eyed, and more like her father Halle than ever before. The sneer he remembered from Denver was gone, replaced by a smile of kindness and firmness. When they were talking about Beloved, Paul D said, "Well, if you want my opinion..." "I don't want it. I have my own." Denver is the representative of a new generation of black women, in her readers can see the hope of black women.

4. CONCLUSION

The novel is based on the grandmother Baby Suggs, the main character Sethe and her young daughter Denver, revealing the tragic fate of black women oppressed by slavery. Under slavery, black women were defined as slaves and were objectified as others. The abolition of slavery did not make them truly get rid of the tragic fate, but they lived in the shadow of slavery, which led to a serious crisis of individual identity consciousness of black slave women.

By analyzing the lack of black women's identity and the status of the non-autonomy of the other, this paper explains their difficult process from the awakening of self-consciousness, self-return and self-identity reconstruction. This article emphasizes that only by loving yourself, actively engaging with the black community, facing the ghosts of history and refinding the meaning of history to reality can we shatter the attached otherness and embark on the road of obtaining of a subjective position.

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