

Literature Review on Morrison's *Beloved* From the Perspective of New Historicism

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Abstract

As one of the most formally sophisticated novelists in the history of African American literature, Toni Morrison (1931-) has exerted vibrating influence upon the literary world. Her achievement in literature marks another monument in African American literature after the summit reached by Richard Wright (1908-1960) and Ralph Ellison (1914-1994). *Beloved* (1987), Morrison's masterpiece, deals with the legacy of slavery in its depiction of a runaway slave's struggle to claim the freed self. Since its publication, *Beloved* has inspired a considerable quantity of reviews, essays and book-length studies on various subjects with different critical methodologies both at home and abroad. Through analyzing these studies on *Beloved*, it can be found that part of Morrison's project in *Beloved* is to subvert the mainstream white culture's tampering of the black culture, restore their survival condition, and reconstruct the marginalized black history. Her unique way of dealing with history in fiction and the relationship between history and fiction coincides with the core of New Historicism.

Key words: *Beloved*; Literature review; New historicism

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INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison, one of the most outstanding and prolific contemporary African American writers, has received Noble Laureate for Literature in 1993 on the account of the fact that she "in novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import, gives life to an essential aspect of American reality" (Allen, 1997, p. 42). Moreover, she is the first and the only black woman writer who has won this prize up till now. In her over four decades of literary creation, Toni Morrison has published ten novels: *The Bluest Eye* (1970); *Sula* (1973); *Song of Solomon* (1977); *Tar Baby* (1981); *Beloved* (1987); *Jazz* (1992); *Paradise* (1998); *Love* (2003); *A Mercy* (2008); *Home* (2012) and *God Help the Child* (2015). In addition to this, she has also published one play, one short story, several essays, as well as some children's books. It is precisely owing to her constructive contributions to African American literature that she has been awarded so many well-known prizes, such as the National Book Critics Circle Award, the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Award, the National Book Award, the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, the Nobel Prize for Literature. As American critic Nancy J. Peterson declares, "'Toni Morrison' has become the name around which debates of considerable significance to American literature, culture, and ideology have amassed." (Peterson, 1993, p.465)

Undoubtedly, Morrison has become a major voice among black writers. Throughout her life, Morrison puts special emphasis on the life and fate of the black people, especially the black women. She gives up the usual stereotype of women images in black literature and gives black women the intelligent wisdom, vitality and courage to revolt to pursue their new life. Morrison cultivates a greater number of rebellious and awakening black women images and exposes their deeds and hopes, their happiness and upsets. Her imaginative and poetic novels vividly depict the extremely important aspect of reality, which

consequently helps to establish a monument to American literature.

Morrison, most of whose novels are set in African-American history, has a strong consciousness of history and nationality. Among these, *Beloved* is the most representative one that reveals her reflections on the past and tortures American history.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW ON *BELOVED*

Set during the Reconstruction era in 1873, *Beloved*, Morrison's fifth novel, plays a crucial role in her literary creation and brings Morrison to the forefront of American letters. Walter Clemons's high assessment in *Newsweek*—"I think we have a masterpiece on our hand here" (Clemons, 1987, p.75) is indicative of the overwhelming praise *Beloved* received almost immediately. It is precisely due to the publication of *Beloved* that Toni Morrison won the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award in Race Relations, the Melcher Book Award and the 1988 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. As Morrison's most stirring and mature masterpiece, *Beloved* is considered to be an immortal classic in the history of contemporary American literature. In the early year of 2006, *The New York Times* spoke highly of the novel as "best American fiction in 25 years". Morrison's works have always been representing and exploring the themes of the history, destiny and spiritual world of black people, with a focus on gender, race and culture as the main discourse (Wang, 2008, p.306). With the publication of *Beloved*, an ever-increasing number of reviews, essays and book-length studies from different kinds of perspectives have been done at home and abroad. So far, researchers at home and abroad have conducted in-depth researches on the themes of the novel, the characteristics of black literature, ethnic issues, and physical politics from such theoretical perspectives as postcolonialism, narratology, psychoanalysis, feminism, trauma theory, new historicism, and postmodern realism. These diversified studies on the novel have achieved a huge success, though there are still several deficiencies in them.

1.1 Studies on *Beloved* Abroad

As far as western critics and scholars are concerned, continuous interpretations on *Beloved* have been going on.

As to studies on the characters in the novel, in the essay "*Daughters Signifyin(g) History: The Example of Toni Morrison's Beloved*" (1992), Ashraf H. A. Rushdy places great emphasis on the historical symbolic connotation of the daughter Beloved. He holds the view that while the character Beloved is "a symbol of an unrelenting criticism of the dehumanizing function of the institution of slavery" and embodies the past that must be remembered so as to be forgotten, Denver signifies "the

embracing glance, the loving view, the need to remember" and she becomes the site of hope (Rushdy, 1992, p.578). Teresa N. Washington's article *The Mother-Daughter Aje Relationship in Toni Morrison's Beloved* (2005) does research on the relationship between mother and daughter. Olivia M. Pass centers on giving an analysis of the psychological emotions of the characters in his essay *Toni Morrison's Beloved: A Journey Through the Pain of Grief* (2006). In the article *The Restorative Power of Sound: A Case of Communal Catharsis in Toni Morrison's Beloved* (2007), Roxanne R. Reed probes into the spiritual leading role which the black women play.

Considering studies on themes of the novel, Barbara Schapiro analyzes the theme of love and self in his paper *The Bonds of Love and the Boundaries of Self in Toni Morrison's Beloved* (1991). In the essay *Narrating the Self: Aspects of Moral Psychology in Toni Morrison's Beloved* (1997), Thomas M. Linehan explores the moral psychology problems of the black. In the article *Violence, Home and Community in Toni Morrison's Beloved* (1999), Nancy Jesser studies home and community of the black. Peggy Ochoa's paper *Morrison's Beloved: Allegorically Othering "White" Christianity* (1999) delves into religious theme of the novel. Mary J.S. Eliot's main concern in his essay *Postcolonial Experience in a Domestic Context: Commodified Subjectivity in Toni Morrison's Beloved* (2000) is the subjectivity and identity construction of the black. Robert Fallon concentrates on the theme of music and memory in his article *Music and the Allegory of Memory in "Margaret Garner"* (2006).

With regard to artistic form, Jewell P. Rhodes' essay *Toni Morrison's Beloved: Ironies of a "Sweet Home" Utopia in a Dystopian Slave Society* (1990) seeks to analyze the irony art while Wendy Harding and Jacky Martin's article *Reading at the Cultural Interface: The Corn Symbolism of Beloved* (1994) synthesizes the art of symbolism in the novel. Lynd Koolish explores the art of cinematography in his essay *Fictive Strategies and Cinematic Representations in Toni Morrison's Beloved: Post-clonial Theory/Postclonial Text* (1995). In the paper *Toni Morrison's Beloved: Bodies Returned, Modernism Revisited* (1998), Cynthia Dobbs gives preference to the modernist writing techniques. Rafael Perez-Torres' article *Knitting and Knotting the Narrative Thread—Beloved as Postmodern Novel* (1993) is mainly concerned with postmodern narrative tactics.

Among the book-length studies on *Beloved*, the most frequently quoted book is William L. Andrew and Nellie Y. McKay's *Toni Morrison's Beloved: A Casebook* (1999), which collects essays by some of the most respected and representative critics today in African American and contemporary literature, including Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, Karla F. C. Holloway, Mae G. Henderson, Linda Krumholz, Trudier Harris, Lori Askeland, Rafael Perez-Torres, along with a concluding "conversation"

among Barbara T. Christian, Deborah E. McDowell and Nellie Y. McKay. The volume also provides some historical context for the novel by reprinting Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's poem *The Slave Mother* and also Samuel J. May's 1856 account of and commentary on Margaret Garner's murder of her young daughter. The volume admirably achieves its goal as started by Nellie Y. McKay in the introduction:

To present teachers and scholars with a small group of essays that not only are worthy of inclusion but also that address some of the issues that readers often raise about the book. We believe they will be valuable to those who teach or write about the novel.

Cheryl B. Torsney and Judy Elsley bring together eleven provocative essays on the quilt as metaphor—in literature, history, politics, and philosophy in their monograph *Quilt Culture: Tracing the Pattern* (1994), in which the authors interpret Morrison's *Beloved* as a kind of memory and identity based on Quilt Culture. This interdisciplinary approach makes *Quilt Culture* an extraordinarily rich exploration of a cultural artifact whose meaning is far more complex than that of a simple bed covering. Dolan Hubbard creates *The Sermon and the African American Literary Imagination* (1994), analyzing Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*. Hubbard has a profound reflection on American slavery and gives a strong support on black cultural traditions. Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu's *The Toni Morrison Encyclopedia* (2003) includes nine interviews with Morrison and more than a hundred articles. These articles seek to probe into Morrison's creation from various perspectives such as African mythology, ancestral worship, feminism, historical, post-colonial and psychological analysis, death, family life, folk tales, oral traditions, Greek mythology, ghost stories, identity, music, maternal love.

Admittedly, judging from the variety of approaches taken, *Beloved* criticism in the West has reached a new stage. Nevertheless, a prevalent problem in *Beloved* criticism in the West is to cut *Beloved* to find critical evaluation on a single code of reference, which inevitably gives rise to distortions and omissions.

1.2 Studies on *Beloved* at Home

When Toni Morrison visited China with an American writer delegation in 1985, few people in China were familiar with her name or her works. The studies on *Beloved* were almost non-existent except for Wang Youxuan and Luo Xuanmin's articles. With the news of the 1993 Nobel Prize for Literature reaching China, a group of Chinese scholars began to attach greater importance to Morrison's novels, especially the Pulitzer-winning *Beloved*, bringing about a cluster of essays published in various academic journals.

In terms of artistic creation, Xi Jinchuan's article in *Foreign Literature Studies* (1997) interprets *Beloved* from

the perspective of magic realism. Zhang Ruwen and Zhou Qun's essay in *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching* (2005), by analyzing vocabulary, grammar and rhetoric devices, shows how Toni Morrison makes use of the relationships between language and power to create the two main discourses in the confusion of time and space of *Beloved* (Zhang & Zhou, 2005, p.28). In 1993, Luo Xuanmin's critical article entitled "*Absurd Rationality and Rational Absurdity: On the Critical Consciousness of Toni Morrison's Beloved*" addresses motherhood, exploring Morrison's critique of traditional attitudes towards motherhood as both confining and destructive and illustrating her humanist concerns in the novel (Luo, 1993, pp.64-65).

Regarding narrative structure, Weng Lehong publishes her paper in *Foreign Literature Review* (1999), which reveals that Morrison endows *Beloved* with complex characteristics ranging from man and ghost, tradition and reality to spirit and material. These characteristics not only contribute to *Beloved* as a pivotal character in the narrative development of the whole novel, but also become a narrative strategy of Morrison's novel creation (Weng, 1999, pp.65-72). Wang Lili's essay in *Journal of South-Central University for Nationalities (Humanities and Social Sciences)* (2004), based on narratology, does research on the inner relationships between central narration and marginal narration in *Beloved* and shows Morrison's feminine writing brings a new meaning to literature.

In light of symbolic image, Sun Wei's article in *Journal of Southwest University for Nationalities (Philosophy and Social Sciences)* (2002) demonstrates Morrison uses "water" as symbolic images in *Beloved* and connects the images with black history and culture and the protagonists' psyche in a poetic and realistic way, skillfully deepening the themes of the novel.

As for the analysis of ideological contents, Wang Shouren's essay in *Foreign Literature Review* (1994) probes into the themes in *Beloved* in a fuller way. Dong Junfeng's article in *Foreign Literature Studies* (1994) delves into the cruelty and sufferings of slavery. Zhang Ruwen's article in *Foreign Literature* (2000) analyzes maternal love and infanticide in *Beloved*. Jiang Xinxin's essay in *Theory and Criticism of Literature and Art* (2002) probes into the feminine theme in the novel.

In addition to a great many critical essays on *Beloved*, there are some book-length studies on it, among which Hu Xiaoying's monograph (2004) and Luo Yi's monograph (2012) are the examples. Hu's monograph, the first monograph on Morrison's single work, not only analyzes *Beloved*'s historical background, *Beloved* criticism in academia, African American literature, but also does a comparative research with other relevant novels. Furthermore, other book-length studies referring to *Beloved* are quite well done. Wang Shouren and Wu

Xinyun's monograph *Gender, Race and Culture: A Study of Toni Morrison's Novels* (2004), based on both a close textual analysis of Morrison's published novels and an examination of related social, political contexts, explores the development of Morrison's ideas and thoughts on gender, race and culture. In a similar way, Tian Yaman offers a book-length study of Morrison's five novels: *The Bluest Eye, Song of Solomon, Sula, Beloved and Jazz* (2009), but it is a more scholarly undertaking for Tian sees maternal love as a central idea that governs the five novels. Wang Yukuo's *Toni Morrisn Study* (2005), which is the result of his dissertation project, is written from a New Historicist perspective. The publication of academic monographs marks a deeper research into and ever-growing attention to Morrison and her works.

Although those studies on *Beloved* have gained a big success and made a significant difference, there are still some problems in this research field. In the first place, while some studies lack theoretical frameworks, others tend to do mechanical analysis based on a certain "hot" theory, which gives rise to, in different degrees, over-interpretation. In the second place, up to now most Chinese scholars have concentrated on the individual text, and few have made endeavors to give a comparative analysis with other related works in the larger social and cultural contexts.

2. MORRISON'S VIEW OF HISTORY

In 2000, Linden Peach published his *Toni Morrison*. In his first essay *Biographical and Critical Contexts*, Peach made comments on the approaches to interpreting Toni Morrison and her works and suggested New Historicist perspective be an appropriate approach to understanding Toni Morrison and her works. New Historicist ideas had a great impact on Morrison. She believed that the real history needs rewriting rather than recording. Taking *Beloved* as an example, Morrison restores the historical event of Margaret Garner's infanticide. She would rather kill her own baby than keep them to be enslaved, demonstrating the destruction of human nature under slavery. Through creating the life story of Sethe's infanticide, she reconstructed the truth in history in its truest aspect.

Many a book on American slavery mainly refers to the slavery itself or the abolition of slavery, which ignores or suppresses the inner life of the black. Instead Morrison, in her novel *Beloved*, intends to not only show slavery, but display the slaves' survival condition. On the one hand, Morrison represents the darkness of slavery in *Beloved* from Southern Plantations to the Middle Passage. History is vividly presented to readers. On the other hand, Morrison attempts to reproduce the history of the collective trauma of African-Americans by describing the traumatic past of the individual like Sethe, Paul D

and Baby Suggs. Through restoring and reconstructing the unremembered and distorted history and describing the historical trauma of the black, we can have a better understanding of the fact that Morrison has a strong sense of history and nationality. Morrison revealed how black slaves were excluded from the discourse power in the process of historical writing. It was through the deprivation, the discipline and punishment of the body that the slave-owners imposed "otherness" on the black, thus resulting in their "absence" and made history based on the ideology of slave-owners. Moreover, *Beloved* contributed to the creation of a typical character so as to fill in the historical gaps of American Blacks in the slavery era, thus arousing modern black people to recognize their own identities via remembering their history. Last but not least, owing to slavery, they also lost their own culture and a new generation of Afro-Americans moved away from the roots of traditional culture and became cultural exiles. Therefore, there was an urgent need for them to quest for their own culture.

Morrison refuses to distinguish between "fiction" and "history", instead she centers on "who is telling the story of the past, and how the story confines contemporary understanding of American slavery" (Wang, 2007, p.140). The interaction between history and literature subverts the binary opposition between the two in the traditional sense and reflects the homogeneity of literature and history as discourse practice.

CONCLUSION

Up till now, scholars at home and abroad have delved into *Beloved* from different points of view of post-colonialism, narratology, psychoanalysis, feminism, trauma theory, new historicism, postmodern realism and other theoretical frameworks, with which they analyze the themes of the novel, features of black literature, racial issues, body politics. These various research perspectives greatly deepen the reader's understanding of *Beloved* and the meaning of the text. In particular, Morrison's view of history can be fully demonstrated, which also expands research perspectives on this novel like New Historicism. A review of Toni Morrison's rise to national and even global literary recognition, and an examination of different stages of Toni Morrison study, which form a critical context of Morrison's literary texts, would show a gradual revision of literary canon, illustrating the significant paradigm shift in critical approaches to black writing.

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