

The Interweaving of Memory and Reality: Magical Realism in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Hanwen Zhang

Department of English, Nanjing University of Aeronautics and Astronautics, China

Abstract: Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison employs the technique of magical realism in her representative work *Beloved*, skillfully combining magical and realistic elements together, allowing characters to bravely face the trauma of history, find the courage in life and explore the path of future development. This article explores the magical and realistic elements in the novel, exploring how they are connected to encourage the characters to accept history and face the reality. At the same time, it also reveals the sins of slavery and its profound negative impact. Morrison also points out a path for the development of the black community: learn to accept the past and face the future with courage. Only in this way can a nation awaken its own spiritual strength.

Keywords: Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, Magical Realism, Slavery, Black Community.

1. Introduction

Toni Morrison is one of the excellent contemporary African American female writers, renowned for her profound literary works and exploration of African American history and culture. Toni Morrison was the first African American female writer to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature, and she subsequently won the Pulitzer Prize in 1998 and 2015, respectively. *Beloved* is one of her representative works, set in the late 19th century of Southern United States. Sethe was a black woman who used to be a slave. Just as she escaped the shackles of slavery with her child, the former slave owner found them. In order to protect the child from the pain and shame of slavery, Sethe killed her daughter in person and named her "Beloved". However, Beloved transformed into a resurrected baby girl and reappeared in Sethe's life. The appearance of Beloved triggered complex emotions and inner struggles for Sethe and her family.

Scholars at home and abroad have conducted in-depth research on the novel *Beloved*. Foreign scholars' research on Beloved mainly focuses on trauma theory, race, gender, and the historical memory of slavery. For example, many scholars believe that Beloved portrays the concretization of psychological trauma through its characters and plot; Some study also demonstrates the profound impact of slavery on the collective memory of African Americans through different narrative techniques such as magical realism. Domestic scholars mainly focus on maternal themes, feminism, narrative art and cultural connotations in their research on the book. For example, many scholars have explored the various challenges and dilemmas women face in history, society, and families through their female identity; Also, some scholars explore the narrative techniques and styles through close reading of the text; Some scholars have also explored the profound impact of racial oppression and gender discrimination on black people from the perspectives of historical connotations and social significance.

Although rich achievements have been made in the study of *Beloved*, there are still some shortcomings. Research has mostly focused on literary and cultural aspects, with relatively less exploration of its social and practical significance, as well as the influence of Toni Morrison's personal experience and historical background on the creation. Also, scholars often

focus on exploring narrative art and rarely analyze the close connection between narrative techniques and the themes of the book. As a strategy and tool used by writers to combat colonial oppression and racial discrimination, Magical Realism combines factual narratives with illusions or myths to explore insights about humanity and society, which has a strong Latin American flavor. This has a high degree of integration with the author Toni Morrison and the background of the novel, and has extremely high exploration value. Therefore, this article will take the perspective of Magical Realism as the starting point and unfold from three aspects: magical elements, realistic elements and the integration of them in the novel to explore: under the oppression of slavery, how the protagonist Sethe and the black slave community connect memories with reality, heal historical pain and find self-identity. Additionally, this article will also connect Morrison's personal life to further explain its practical significance.

2. The Magical Elements in *Beloved*

2.1. Magical Character: The Ghost Child "Beloved"

The magical element of the story is reflected in the character image--the ghost child "Beloved". Based on the development of the story, we ultimately know that this child is the child who was killed by Sethe in person. However, before uncovering this mystery, the novel provides many special clues with magical elements. For example, the shattered mirror and the "two tiny hand prints in the cake"; "Beloved has a round and plump figure like an adult woman" and "Her skin was flawless". When Sethe saw Beloved by the river for the first time, she felt it "set her bladder filled to capacity", "more like flooding the boat when Denver was born", She felt like giving birth as soon as she saw Beloved; Denver saw a white dress holding on Sethe while she was praying, with one sleeve wrapped around her waist; Beloved also knew that Sethe once had a pair of crystal earrings and she could also hum the lullaby created by Sethe. Surprisingly, Beloved sought love from Sethe without reason or restraint. The ghost image "Beloved" possesses mysterious and supernatural qualities. Her existence is not only puzzling, but also has a strong impact and resonance on the reader's soul.

In addition, another magical color in the character setting of the ghost child is that it carries the color of African religions. They believe that after death, a person's soul can be reincarnated. The deceased can only return to the human world after being summoned by the living, and the strong emotions of the living are the conditions on which they rely for resurrection and survival. Even though Sethe killed Beloved, she still erected a tombstone and engraved characters for her, and had been missing her since then. The profound maternal love brought the ghost child back to the human world. All of these add psychedelic color to the novel.

2.2. Unique Structure: Anachronies and Block Narration Structure

The unique story structure of the novel also presents the magical color. Beloved integrates the past, present and future and interweaves reality, dreams, memories and illusions together. The novel doesn't unfold in the order of events, but rather seems to piece together different fragments of memory. For example, the novel adopts "Anachronies". At the beginning of the story, it informs the reader that "124 WAS SPITEFUL. Full of a baby's venom", implying that Beloved is the child who has returned to life. Subsequently, the author introduces the experiences of the Sethe and her family as well as the story of beloved being killed. Also, the novel adopts block narrative structure. For instance, while Denver and Sethe were discussing the haunted house, Sethe's memories were suddenly pulled back to the scene of carving a tombstone for beloved; When Sethe was talking to Paul D, his memories suddenly jumped to the scene when they first met. Such descriptions are common in the novel. Morrison makes readers feel as if they are exploring the truth in a mist through continuous time jumps and perspective shifts. Morrison boldly interweaves the past and present, describing what happens now to fill the gaps in the past life, thereby driving the plot forward.

3. The Realistic Elements in Beloved

3.1. The Devastation of Sethe's Individual Consciousness by Slavery

Slavery, as the foundation of the novel and running through the entire novel, cannot be ignored. Hu Quansheng points out that slavery was "the maker of darkness". After the end of the American Civil War, "the consciousness of black slavery did not dissipate and still gnawed at the hearts of black people, affecting their thinking and understanding". This historical legacy is not only reflected in the devastation of individuals, but also in its impact on the black community. The characters in the novel are "trapped in a collective unconsciousness", and they all live in past experiences that are difficult to free themselves from.

Firstly, the novel deeply reveals the devastation of slavery on the individual through Sethe. As a black slave, Sethe suffered from the cruelty of slave owners. For example, in order to engrave characters on beloved's tombstone, Sethe had to accept the unreasonable demands of the engraver. But the most serious is the psychological trauma to individuals, who are deeply trapped in the swamp of slavery, wanting to escape while in vain. For instance, a white girl named the scar on Sethe's back "cherry tree", which was a wonderful thing in her eye. However, Sethe happily accepted this statement, showcasing a state of numbness. Sethe was deeply troubled by the memory of infanticide. During her escape, the various

hardships she experienced and the immense pain of losing her child were deeply engraved in her soul. The appearance of Beloved seemed to be a concrete manifestation of her deep fear and guilt. Sethe's desire to protect her child was actually her redemption for her previous actions and anxiety about the future. Her extraordinary desire to protect Beloved stemmed from her fear of losing freedom and dignity.

3.2. The Oppression of Black People by Slavery

In terms of the entire black community, they are also influenced by slavery inevitably. The fate of slaves, as Baby Suggs said, "Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief." Baby Suggs, as a representative of the generation completely controlled by slavery, vividly showcased the numbness of black slaves under political constraints. She was oppressed and manipulated by slave owners, and was called "Jenny", which was the name written on the label when she was sold. After Sethe's infanticide, she tried to understand and forgive but suffered humiliation and had a mental breakdown. To the black slaves working in the "Sweet Home", they didn't know their names and their owners called them Paul A, Paul D and Paul F. The fate of the three brothers was tragic. Paul A was killed during his escape, Paul F was resold and Paul D suffered humiliation throughout his life. As a result, he became suspicious of people's self-esteem and even doubted whether he was human. From the cruelty of the slave trade, to the inhumane treatment of slave owners, and to the various dangers of escape, Morrison uses these details to make readers deeply feel the dual harm of slavery to the body and mind. Beloved is not only Sethe's personal story, but also the oppression of the entire black community.

4. The Integration of Magic and Reality--Building a Bridge between Memory and Reality

4.1. The Awakening of Sethe's Self-awareness

Before the appearance of Beloved, Sethe strongly resisted recalling her experience of infanticide. She wanted to alleviate the pain through the passing of time, but her heart was still tormented. In her view, this action was to completely free the child from the shackles of slavery, but secular moral norms still couldn't spare her. The neighbors distanced themselves from their family, and Denver's classmates mocked her. Even Paul D, who had suffered the same hardships as her, couldn't understand her actions. Sethe felt extremely hopeless and could only immerse herself into past regrets and self doubt. So she chose to isolate herself. However, the turning point happened after the arrival of Beloved. At first, in order to make up for her guilt towards her child, Sethe accompanied Beloved all day, satisfying all the needs of her. During this process, Beloved constantly stimulated Sethe to recall the past and awakened the memories she had tried her utmost to avoid. "Me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow." In the end, Beloved disappeared. Sethe also realized that the trauma of the past cannot be erased. Only by facing it and accepting it can we better move towards the future. The presence of Beloved prompted Sethe to re-examine her behavior, thereby achieving self-awareness awakening. It is not only a healing of personal trauma, but

also a recognition of her own identity.

4.2. The Black Community's Re-examination of History

Although slavery was abolished in 1873, the discrimination and violence against black people in white society did not disappear. For the black community, "Beloved" also carried the shared memories of black slaves--the profound impact of slavery. Beloved claimed to be a slave and was sold by slave traders from Africa to America. Her experience was a true portrayal of the life of black ancestors during the slave era, carrying all the suffering of slavery. It is precisely with the magical image of "Beloved" that the author is able to connect the black community with history, allowing the black community to re-examine the impact of slavery. Under slavery, the black community was selfish and indifferent. They ignored slave owners' capturing of Sethe and her child and harshly accused Sethe of infanticide. Later, with the efforts and preaching of Stamp Paid, the black people realized the strength of collective power. Together, they helped Sethe resist the spiritual oppression of the ghost child, and accepted Sethe's family, demonstrating a positive and united collective character. Morrison calls on the black community to unite, face the trauma of the past and the challenges of the future together with stronger strength.

4.3. Toni Morrison: Expressing Reality with Magic and Rebuilding a Home for Soul

At the same time, the novel reveals Morrison's outlook on the future development path of the black community, and also embodies her wonderful wishes. Morrison was born in Lorraine, Ohio, which was once the border between the Southern Slave States and the Northern Free States. There, Morrison learned black folk stories from the elder generation and was exposed to true black culture. In Lorraine, although there were no residential areas specifically designed to isolate black people, she personally experienced the various inconveniences caused by racial discrimination as a black person. Morrison integrates her personal experience and identification with black culture into *Beloved*, connecting the past and present through the interweaving of magic and reality, linking the individual and collective traumas of black slaves, and deeply criticizing slavery. Through delicate descriptions and profound insights, she showcases the courage and resilience of the black people in the face of suffering, as well as expressed a profound recognition of black culture and the pursuit of freedom and dignity. The trauma of the past should not be forgotten, but blindly

indulging in it can also make people fall deeper and deeper. When faced with historical legacy issues, Morrison points out a path for us: review the past, strengthen the communication between different generations and establish close connections between history and present. Only in this way can a nation awaken its own spiritual strength as well as enhance national cohesion and confidence.

5. Conclusion

Toni Morrison employs the technique of Magical Realism throughout the book, recalling the past, facing the history, building a bridge of understanding and finding the identity of individual and community. At the same time, she calls on the world to re-examine black slavery, warns the black community not to forget history and encourages them to face the pain of history with great courage and regain confidence in life.

References

- [1] Kate Rose, Gong Qiangwei & Xue Wei. (2019). Magical Realism: Feminist Subversive Language Construction. *Chinese Comparative Literature*, (01), 187-196. doi:10.16234/j.cnki.cn31-1694/i.2019.01.016.
- [2] Liu Xiaozhen. (2011). Unique Narrative Art - Rereading Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. *Gansu Social Sciences*, (05), 78-80. doi:10.15891/j.cnki.cn62-1093/c.2011.05.003.
- [3] Zhu Li. (2017). Postmodern Narrative Strategies in *Beloved*. *Studies in English and American Literature*, (02), 231-240. doi:10.16754/b.cnki.ymwxyjlc.2017.02.019. Chen Mo. (2019). Study on teaching plane structure guided by Environmental art major. *Popular colors* (10), 167-168.
- [4] Zheng Guangrui. (2012). Magical Color and Black Style in African American Women's Literature. *Journal of Social Sciences*, (02), 219-222.
- [5] Xi Chuanjin. (2003). On the Grotesque Duality in *Beloved*. *Foreign Literature Studies*, (05), 68-74+172-173.
- [6] Xu Yang. (2011). Self-Redemption of the Soul - On Sethe's Psychological Liberation in *Beloved*. *Journal of Liaoning University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, (05), 132-134.
- [7] Elahi, M., & Khan, A. (2023). The Restoration of History through Magical Realism in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. *Dialogue (Pakistan)*, 18(3), 1-9.
- [8] Jin Yanli. (2010). The Search for Self by the Black Nation in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. *Journal of Southwest University for Nationalities (Humanities and Social Sciences Edition)*, (04), 241-244.