

An Analysis of *Beloved* from the Perspective of New Historicism

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Abstract: American black writer Toni Morrison's (1931-2019) novel *Beloved* is an in-depth exploration of the deplorable living situations and psychological trauma of marginalized African American slaves, based on a famous historical case. New historicists emphasize on the stories told or written by those marginalized groups, and their concerns can be applied to Morrison's novel. This paper analyzes *Beloved* from the perspective of New Historicism, aiming to explore how the writer achieved the interaction between history and text, reconstructed and revealed the history of those marginalized people neglected by mainstream history, and reconstructed and reestablished their own cultural identities and voices by helping African Americans to fill in the missing historical memories of the period of slavery through the text.

Keywords: New Historicism; *Beloved*; discourse; Textuality of History; Historicity of Texts.

1. Introduction

Toni Morrison (1931-2019), a renowned contemporary American black writer and critic, Morrison's work was rooted in African American history, and it remained a consistent theme of representation and exploration of black history, destiny, and spirituality, with the manifestation of gender, race, and culture as the dominant discourse field [8]. And her achievement in the novel is another peak in the history of black American literature after Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison. Toni Morrison was honored with the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993, and she was the first black woman in American literary history to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. During Morrison's 60-year writing career, she wrote eleven novels, five children's books, two plays, a collection of songs, and an opera. Her main achievement, however, lies in the novels she has written, represented by *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). Most of these works by Morrison focus on the black race and black women in the United States, with vividly realistic and imaginative characters, language and story. Toni Morrison associates the creation of the novel with the awakening and liberation of the black nation, vividly depicting the situation of the black nation's survival, from which she reveals the dominant culture's suppression and destruction of the minority African-American culture. In addition, she also seeks to call on black intellectuals through literary discourse to turn to the black ethnic culture itself and reconstruct ethnic consciousness from those traditions that have been despised by the white mainstream culture in the past. At the same time, as a female writer, Morrison, with her unique female perspective and based on her special female experience, closely connects the process of black women's self-seeking and the process of reconstructing the black national consciousness, forming a trend of interaction and co-evolution [1].

Beloved is Morrison's remarkable 5th novel, which was written in the 1980s, over a hundred years after the abolition of slavery [2]. The novel reflects Toni Morrison's strong awareness of black history, and Morrison uses the novel to

reconstruct an essential part of African American history. *Beloved* is drawn from *The Black Book*, edited by Morrison at Random House in the 1960s and 1970s, which collected material from the centuries-long struggle for equality and discourse by African Americans, and has been described as "an encyclopedia of black history in the United States." *Beloved* is organized on the basis of a historically true event, Margaret Garner's case. Margaret Garner was a black slave woman who escaped from her slave masters by bringing her four children down the Ohio River from Kentucky to the freedom of the Ohio. When the slavers found her hiding place, she decisively cut her little daughter's throat so that her children would not continue to live in slavery and experience a life of misery and cruelty. This is the famous Margaret Garner's case. Sethe, one of the main protagonists in *Beloved*, is the prototype of Margaret Garner, and *Beloved* is the prototype of the murdered baby girl in Margaret Garner's Case. Morrison borrows this real historical event in the form of literary discourse, represents the physical and psychological damage of slavery on African Americans. Morrison uses the construction of the past through the use of real events to help African Americans understand their own past and face the real history, so as to re-establish their own cultural identities and voices.

Morrison achieves an interaction between literature and history through the form of the novel. The novel reflects Morrison's strong view of history, which is similar to the ideas of New Historicists. Taking the New Historicist perspective as a starting point, this paper aims to explore how history and the novel *Beloved* interact with each other, revealing the history of long-suppressed African-Americans and searching for the discourses that have been drowned out by them by means of literary discourse.

By interpreting *Beloved* from the perspective of New Historicism, Toni Morrison provides new textual examples for the study of New Historicism, and also enriches the study of *Beloved* with new perspectives. Secondly, Toni Morrison, by reconstructing the historical discourse and reproducing the real state of existence of black slaves in the form of literary discourse, helps African Americans to fill in the missing memories, to reclaim the past, to face the past and to search for their own identity, culture and voice, and to promote the

development of black culture in the United States. In addition, *Beloved* takes a different perspective to help contemporary readers more clearly recognize the truth of slavery and understand African American culture [4].

2. Theoretical Framework

This part is about the elaboration of the theory of New Historicism. The background and development of the New Historicism will be summarized, and then the core ideas of the New Historicism will be elaborated in detail.

2.1. Background and Development of New Historicism

The 1960s was a special time in American history, and it was also a time when the New Historicists who emerged in the 1980s were attending college or beginning their academic careers. The Vietnam War, the women's movement, the academic movement, and the civil rights movement, all left their marks on the 1960s generation. Montrose argues that much of the reorientation of the field of literary studies from the early 1980s was due to those critics who formed part of the cultural experimentation and political upheaval of the 1960s. [7] Thus, since the 1980s, new historicism, feminism, and Marxism have led an ideological and political critique that is largely a legacy of the 1960s.

New Historicism emerged in the United States in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and with its twin rebellions against formalism and the former historicism, it soon set off a paradigm revolution in the field of English Renaissance, and Shakespeare studies in particular. The founding work of the New Historicism research paradigm is Greenblatt's book, *Self-fashioning: from More to Shakespeare*. In this book, Greenblatt examines the theme of Renaissance self-fashioning through a cultural or anthropological approach to criticism.[4] He attempted to relate literature to other forms of cultural expression, examining "social existence in the world of the literary text and social existence in the world of the literary text", with the aim of developing a cultural poetics. But by this time, the implications of new historicism as a critical practice had not yet been formalized. In 1982, in the introduction to Genre's thematic issue *The Power of Forms and the Forms of Power in the English Renaissance*, Greenblatt declared, "The papers collected here express what we might call a New Historicism." [5] Thereafter, the term New Historicism began to circulate. Since then, Greenblatt and his colleagues at the University of California, Berkeley, have founded *Representations*, which has led to more scholars committing themselves to a return to history in literary studies, and the New Historicist movement is no longer confined to the field of the English Renaissance, but rather penetrates into all fields and periods of literary studies. The New Historicism movement reached its peak in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Its representatives include Carolyn Poter in her *History and Literature: After the New Historicism*. [10] She explored how the New Historicism shows greater vitality by escaping from the residue of formalism and achieving a true historical discourse.

2.2. Key Concept of New Historicism

The attitude towards history is the measurement that distinguishes New Historicism from Old Historicism. For the new historicism, history is an artifact of speech, the product of a particular use of language." [6] Historical events and

figures are objects of interpretation, and history is essentially an interpretation of language, a narrative discourse that is inevitably subjective, imaginative and fictional. The New Historicists stated that "the understanding and commentary on historical practices and figures depends to a great extent on the subjectivity of the person who histories them, and his subjectivity in turn depends to a great extent on his or her own political and ideological perceptions, as well as on the dominant discourse and cultural context of that time." [12] For this reason, New Historicists study the curiosities, anecdotes, legends, hagiographies, ballads, etc., spoken or written by classes and groups that have been marginalized by the ruling class. As to how to study literature, the New Historicists advocated understanding society in literature and society at the time the literature was written, combining the study of texts with the study of contexts, and emphasizing the textuality of history and the historicity of texts. The historicity of text means that all kinds of writings, are produced in certain social and historical backgrounds and material environments. The term Textuality of History means that history is textualized and can be constructed by text. According to the New Historicists, no author of a text can boldly claim that his text is purely original, because any text is written with reference to other pre-existing texts, the intertextuality of the text cannot be denied, and there is no fixed, static, ordinary standard for the meaning of a text, which is always in change as it changes with time and place.

3. Historicity of *Beloved*

The New Historicists argued that Texts are written in a certain historical and cultural context. Based on this, Louis Montrose proposed the historicity of texts. This view of Montrose coincides with that of *Beloved*, and this chapter will address Toni Morrison's perception of history as well as explore the historicity reflected in *Beloved*.

3.1. Toni Morrison's Awareness of History

Each of the eight novels Morrison has written is set in American history, particularly African American history, and shows the lives of African Americans during a specific time period. Her works provide a platform for African Americans to re-memorize the past and rethink history. All these reflect Morrison's strong historical awareness.

Morrison believes that artists are the most authentic historians and that the concepts of fiction" and "history should not be divided by man. In the long river of history, African Americans have been shrouded in the shadow of cruel slavery, and in the face of such a situation, many African Americans have chosen to ignore this history and are unwilling to remember it. With a strong sense of responsibility and historical awareness, Morrison presents this history in the form of literary discourse.

In *Beloved*, Morrison does not describe this history in the way of record, but restores this history by describing the way of life and the journey of the black race. Morrison depicts the marginalized group of black people as the main perspective, questioning the dominant discourse and examining and reflecting on history. Through literary discourse, Morrison achieves the interaction between history and text, filling in the history that wants to be forgotten, and re-establishing African Americans' cultural identity and voice by helping them to fill in the missing historical memories of the slavery period through text.

3.2. Historical Reality Reflected in *Beloved*

For the New Historicists, literary texts are closely related to their historical-cultural and social contexts and they are shaped by a particular history. Felperin believes that literary texts are intertextually constructed within a particular historical context. *Beloved* is set against the backdrop of life in the small town of Cincinnati, Ohio, 1855-1873, nine years after President Abraham Lincoln's declaration of the abolition of slavery, and eighteen years after the infanticide that is the subject of the story. Although slavery was abolished, the injuries left behind by slavery continued to ravage African Americans both physically and psychologically. When writing *Beloved*, Morrison showed the readers the daily lives of male and female black slaves, black mothers and children, and black siblings, rather than emphasizing the dominant groups, dominant discourses, and other aspects of that society. Through the portrayal of marginalized characters in the novel, the cruelty of the black slavery system and the plight of black life at that time are reappeared [7].

3.2.1. Exposure of The Essence of Slavery

"Sixty million and more." [8] The quotation at the beginning of the novel actually points directly to an unspeakable history of African Americans and their descendants being thrown into the water after their deaths on the mid-voyage of the transatlantic slave trade. Although it is a tragic history, both whites and blacks decline to remember it. Even worse, it is hard to find any trace of it in the official historical record. Morrison begins with a series of numbers that point to the truth behind the history. In the novel Morrison also gives Sethe's dead daughter, *Beloved*, a special identity that transcends the boundary between the living and the dead to reveal this permanent traumatic memory. With *Beloved*'s stream of consciousness, a vision of reality can be captured:

"The little hill of dead people a hot thing the men without skin push them through with poles ... They are not crouching now we are they are floating on the water"

During the trade voyages, cargo ships were so packed with black slaves that it was difficult for them to even breathe. At least 60 million blacks died in an environment where there was no food, no water, and even no urine to drink. After death, there was no place to store their bodies. Thus, the cold ocean became their grave. Obviously, this stark description is a factual portrayal of the inhuman living conditions of the black slaves. *Beloved*'s narrative reveals not only her personal trauma, but also the collective black trauma, which is carefully hidden in their hearts. In this way Morrison condemns slavery and speaks straight to the truth of history.

3.2.2. Reflections of The Survival of African Americans

African Americans have been subjected to violence since the slave trade, and in a white-dominated society they are considered an animal race with no cultural roots and are treated as private property to be spoken to. The novel is set in the 1850s, and in the novel, Sethe tries to escape with her children by every means in order to prevent them from being subjected to such inhumane suffering. After she and her children are barely free for 20 days or so, the slave owner comes after her to get his property back, and Sethe kills her youngest daughter in her infancy so that her children will not have to go through the same miserable life of slavery that she has experienced. Sethe was eventually imprisoned for theft and trespassing. This verdict, which seems absurd today, reflects a fact. Under the system of black slavery, black slaves were subordinate to masters, commodified objects, and in that

social context, they had no identity, no power, and no voice. It can be seen that *Beloved*, as a literary work, is actually a discourse that realistically recreates the nightmarish past of African Americans through the narratives of fictional characters. Even though black slavery was abolished in the 1950s, the encounters that blacks had gone through had traumatized and shadowed them psychologically and physically.

A passage from the text describing what happens to black people: "Eighteen seventy-four and white folks were still on the loose. Whole towns wiped clean of Negroes; eighty-seven lynching in one year alone in Kentucky; four colored schools burned to the ground; grown men whipped like children; children whipped like adults; black women raped by the crew; property taken and necks broken. He smelled skin, skin and hot blood. The skin was one thing, but human blood cooked in a lynch fire was a whole other thing. The stench stank." [8] This appalling scene is a reminder of those brutal and bloody massacres of black slaves. All the blacks in the town were subjected to extreme torture: children were whipped, women were raped, and property was confiscated. The slaves could do nothing but endure the endless physical and mental pain. For the "lucky" slaves who survived, this was the real suffering. Moreover, in the novel, the "teachers" define the slaves as animals and record their behavior in order to conduct scientific experiments on them. As Sethe says in the text, "I didn't care about measuring lines.... The teacher would wrap the string around my head, cross it over my nose, wrap it around my back, count my teeth." [8] These depictions are strong evidence of the brutality of the black system and the conditions of the black slaves at that time in real history.

4. The Textuality of History

For the New Historicists, history is textualized and can be constructed with texts. Texts are also one of the routes by which people can access history. They argue that history is a discourse, and then as a discourse, history is subjective, imaginable, and even fictionalized. The textuality of history challenges and breaks down the firm and strict boundaries between history and fiction. For Toni Morrison, "the past does not exist or is romanticized." [8] Therefore, in creating *Beloved*, she mixed historical and fictional characters based on real historical cases. The novel's narrative technique of intertwining historical fact and fiction is perplexing, yet thought-provoking [11].

4.1. Fictional Representation of Margaret's Case

The story of *Beloved* is taken from a true historical case. In 1856, a black slave woman named Margaret Garner escaped with her children, and her family, from Kentucky to free Ohio. When slave owners found their hiding place, she cut her youngest daughter's throat. She was eventually convicted of theft and trespass to property. This was the Margaret Garner Daughter Murder Case. Morrison says in the novel's introduction, "The Margaret Garner of history is captivating but restricts a novelist. It leaves too little to my imagination. So I had to invent her ideas, to explore the authentic subtext in a historical context, but not strictly historical, in order to connect her history about freedom, responsibility, the status of women, etc." Therefore, in *Beloved*, Morrison creatively rewrites on historical archetypes through literary imagination, and history is reconstructed as a literary fiction, providing

readers with new perspectives to reconsider this tragic story and to remember black life before and after the Civil War. Sethe in the novel is the prototype of Margaret Garner, both of whom endure the pain of killing their children so that they do not have to go through the same suffering. Eventually being accused of stealing, this recreates in textual form the horrific fact that slaves were the private product of slave owners. In addition, Morrison brings back to life Sethe's dead daughter, and 18 years later Beloved comes back to life and returns to Sethe; these 18 years of Sethe's torment reproduce the true portrayal of a black slave after suffering from a slave owner.

4.2. Fictional Representation of Historical Trauma

Morrison integrates text and history, re-presenting traumatic memories in textual form in order to shed light on all the neglected and unspeakable aspects of black history. Blacks were completely engulfed by that infamous system, and they felt dimly aware of everything in their lives. As depicted in the novel:

"Negroes were so stunned, or hungry, or tired or bereft it was a wonder they recalled or said anything. They had hidden in caves and fought owls for food; ... stole from pigs; ... slept in trees in the day and walked by night; ... had buried themselves in slop and jumped in wells to avoid regulators, raiders, patrollers, veterans, hill men, possess and merry-makers." [8]

The Sweet House in the novel is actually the farm, where the main characters of *Beloved* share a collective traumatic memory. Morrison describes it as "never looked as terrible as it was and it made her wonder if hell was pretty place too" [8]. For both physical and mental pain were her constant companions during her time there.

Morrison chose novel as a fictional form to reconstruct the unspeakable history through the description of the life encounters and journey of the fictional characters, and recalling the history through the form of fictional reappearance is actually the embodiment of African Americans facing up to the history and searching for their own cultural identity [9].

5. Self-fashioning in Containment

The ideas of New Historicism are also influenced by Michel Foucault's theory of power, which argues that nothing escapes the net of power, and that power plays a vital role in the relations of every matter. Ubiquitous power encompasses both macro-power, which exists in nations and states, and micro-power, which exists in relationships of all kinds.[3] Based on this, Greenblatt proposes subversion and containment. The meaning of these two terms is like a pair of antonyms, subversion refers to the skepticism and challenge to the dominant discourse, and containment refers to the suppression of the subversive force. In *Beloved* subversion is in fact the questioning and dissatisfaction of the black slaves with the white discourse; containment is the suppressive actions of the white class in the face of the rebellion of the black slaves.

5.1. The Containment of White People

On the plantation of Sweet House, black slaves like Sethe lived a life like animals. They had no personal freedom, their hands and feet were bound by the chains of slavery; they were

the private property of their owners, who could calculate their value according to body parts, gender, age, etc., and buy and sell them at any time; it was very difficult for them to have a complete family, and it was not uncommon for wives to be separated from their families.

Slave owners held the power of life and death over them, and as long as they did not run away or hang themselves, they were rented, lent, bought, returned, stored, mortgaged, won, stolen and plundered. They had nothing in the world and were deprived of the right to love others, including their own flesh and blood. Black women are not only the labor force of white people, but also the machines for their lust and reproduction. In the novel, Morrison on the one hand expresses the voices of black people who are repressed, and on the other hand she leaves clues that constitute the shaping of black people's self-identity in the process of repression.

5.2. Reconstruction of Black Discourse

Whites often follow the definition that blacks are an uncivilized race; that they are undereducated, backward and ignorant. But as seen in Morrison's *Beloved*, there is no lack of positive representation in black history. Halle, Sethe's husband in the novel, although born into slavery, is keenly aware that knowledge is power and that knowledge can change one's destiny. Therefore, unlike other slaves who mostly focused their minds only on feeding animals, using tools, and growing crops, he also became interested in the alphabet. In the black group, he was the only one who wanted to learn accounting. Like the novel describes: "He bears in mind that "if you can't count, they (white folks) can cheat you; if you can't read, they can beat you." [8]

Beloved comes back to Sethe after 18 years, and her mother dotes on *Beloved* immensely to make up for the damage she has done to her. Though Denver shows the greatest love for her "sister", she cannot bear the threat of the mother who is closest to her. Instead of indulging her "sister", Denver bravely fights back. She came out of the lonely house to reach out to the community and ask for help. Soon, a group of women gathered in front of 124. With their unstoppable support, the *Beloved* was evicted from 124 for good. The unity of the black people inspired Denver to embrace the outside world, which gave her a sense of belonging and security. She struggled to fit into society, working two jobs on the same day and striving for higher education. There is no doubt that Denver's future is one to look forward to and full of hope. Morrison uses "Denver" as an example of the younger generation of blacks who have realized and will do their best to fight for their independence and freedom, to find their own identity culture and voice in the struggle, and to complete the reshaping of themselves.

6. Conclusion

With a strong sense of historical awareness and a sense of social responsibility as an African American, Toni Morrison uses literary discourse to uncover and reconstruct the tragic history of African Americans. In *Beloved*, Morrison presents different images of black people who suffered from the ravages of slavery. Slavery irreparably traumatized black slaves and negated the humanity of black people and deprived them of their voice. Under the impact of slavery, whites occupied the dominant discourse and black voices were marginalized or ignored. Morrison integrates literature and history, and by rewriting real history and exploring the voices of the unwritten and repressed marginalized groups, Morrison

reintroduces a picture of the extremely horrific and even repulsive slave life of African Americans. Moreover, the rewriting and reconstruction of that history through the form of literary discourse has made a great contribution to the black race by giving them back their voices, which responds to the concern of the New Historicists about the marginalized discourse.

Literature is the history of the spirit in which humanity is reshaped. Morrison depicts the suffering of black people in detail through literary discourse, on the one hand in order to depict their survival and on the other hand to criticize the cruelty and dehumanization of slavery. Finally, between the words, she empowers the long-term marginalized blacks with moments of awakening, allowing them to reflect on their history and remember that their own race has a history full of struggle and hope. For black people, history provides them with the tools to understand the past, helps them develop a sense of identity, and advances their culture. Although Morrison's *Beloved* recounts the past, it appeals to national consciousness and asserts dignity for all African Americans. It also reflects the writer's rational consideration of the past and present state of existence of the black nation and the exploration of the road to a better future.

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