

Black Nightmares: An Analysis of *Beloved* from the Perspective of Post-colonialism

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Abstract: *Beloved*, a representative work of Toni Morrison, the only African-American female writer to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, tells the story of black people's miserable lives after the abolition of slavery. Based on the theoretical framework of post-colonialism, this paper will analyze nightmares of African Americans as the other, that are, loss of individual subjectivity, loss of family identity and loss of national culture. The wounds of the past are unforgettable, and the only way for black people to achieve true spiritual freedom is to come to terms with ethnic history and work together.

1. Introduction

Toni Morrison, the first African-American female writer to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, is regarded as one of the greatest novelists of our time. As an incisive thinker and spokesman for black American people, Toni Morrison knows the physical and mental pain that a black person must endure, and this kind of pain is expressed in her novels. Her novels have profound themes, straightaway dialogues and vivid black characters. *Beloved*, one of her works, is considered the best American novel of the past 25 years by the New York Times in 2006. The theme of slavery depicted in *Beloved* is an unavoidable part of American history and an important theme of post-colonialism. Post-colonialism discusses the influence of colonialism on culture, opposes cultural hegemony and advocates the harmonious coexistence of various cultures. This paper will study Toni Morrison's postcolonial thoughts in *Beloved* from the perspective of post-colonialism.

2. *Beloved* and Post-colonialism

Beloved is based on a true story: in the 1850s, a slave woman named Margaret Garner escaped from a slave farm with her child. When the slave owner caught her, Margaret decided to kill her daughter to avoid her repeating tragic fate of being a slave. Morrison uses Margaret as the model for Sethe in *Beloved* after she reads the story while editing *The Negro Book*, a collection of documents on the 300-year struggles for equality and freedom for Random House. *Beloved* constantly shifts its narrative perspective, revealing the pain inflicted by slavery on black people and their pursuit of freedom through the protagonist's broken memories. Sethe and her children escape from the Sweet Home, a plantation in Kentucky, to live with her maternal aunt Baby Suggs at 124 Bluestone Road in suburban Cincinnati. After living happily for 28 days, the schoolteacher of the Sweet Home finds them and wants to bring them back. Sethe is chased to a cabin and in desperation tries to kill all her children. But only the third child, *Beloved*, dies. Since then, 124 has been haunted by the baby's grudge and isolated from the black community. The novel opens on the day when *Beloved's* ghost is driven away by the arrival of Paul D, the last male slave in the Sweet Home plantation. But *Beloved* demands Sethe's love by resurrecting the body of a 20-year-old girl. *Beloved's* endless pursuit of love makes Sethe go to the edge of mental breakdown and even her life is in danger. Eventually, Sethe's youngest daughter, Denver, walks out of 124 and seeks help in the black community. They all rush to 124 to help Sethe to get rid of *Beloved* and start a new life.

The title page of *Beloved* reads, "sixty million or more," a reference to the number of slaves who died in the slave trade. When *Beloved* is first published, Morrison says, "I think it will be the least

read of all my novels, because it is about things that the characters in this novel do not want to remember, that I do not want to remember, that black people do not want to remember, that white people do not want to remember. I mean, it is national amnesia.” [1] Morrison’s deep concern for African-Americans is written into *Beloved*. “The subject of Toni Morrison’s novel *beloved* is slavery,” says Ann Snitow. [2] “In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison clearly exposes the spiritual whipping that follows the end of slavery,” Trudier Harris says. [3] Toni Morrison’s visit to China in 1985 generated much enthusiasm among Chinese readers. Some scholars and critics, such as Wang Shouren, Wu Xinyun, Chen Fachun and Li Guicang, have expressed their unique views on the narrative method and theme of *Beloved*. On the basis of these studies, this paper will analyze the suffering of African-Americans described in *Beloved* from the perspective of post-colonialism, as well as the current harm and the efforts needed to truly achieve liberation.

Postcolonial theory is about identity, gender, race, racism and so on. Colonialism refers to imperialist economic and political aggression against colonies. Post-colonialism differs from colonialism in that post-colonialism studies the influence of imperialism on culture. Culture becomes an important tool for colonialism. It provides intellectual and moral standards for colonization, and transplants the culture of the rulers into the culture of the colonizers. In 1619, twenty black men sailed from Holland to North America, which was the beginning of the history of African-Americans. In 1865, the American Civil War ended slavery, which had plagued blacks for more than a decade. Yet years after slavery ended, black people continued to be spiritually persecuted. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon believes that black people have psychological pain from facing racial discrimination in modern society, because they have lost their traditional culture and cannot integrate into American mainstream culture. They become cultural orphans and the others who are in the shadow of white people [4]. The story of *Beloved* is set in 1873. Toni Morrison describes the spiritual shadow and cultural oppression suffered by black people in the novel. The voices of the characters make people think deeply about the future of black people.

3. Black Nightmares

Beloved was based on a true story: In the 1850s, a female slave Margaret Garner escaped from a Southern plantation with her child. Caught by the slaveholder, Margaret hacked her daughter to death with an axe. Based on Margaret’s story, Toni Morrison created the image of Sethe, the protagonist of *Beloved*. Sethe was hunted down on the run with her children. Because she did not want them to repeat the fate of being enslaved, she killed her daughter, *Beloved*. Eighteen years later, slavery had long since been abolished, *Beloved* returned, endlessly demanding Sethe’s love, which brought Sethe on the verge of a mental breakdown, and the nightmare of the past never stopped pestering Sethe. From the perspective of loss of individual subjectivity, loss of family identity and loss of national culture, this paper deconstructs and reconstructs the text, collating and reproducing the irreparable trauma of ethnic minority individuals and groups.

3.1. Loss of Individual Subjectivity

In an article entitled “The Pain of Being Black,” Morrison pointed out that slavery was a nightmare in American history, and in a way, its greatest sin was the discrimination and alienation of the black people [5]. Under the absolute control of white people, black people were forced to sacrifice their lives for the needs and interests of the whites, while their own needs and interests were completely ignored. They are seen as objects without ideology and without feelings. Even after slavery was abolished, the living conditions of African Americans remained as unfair and oppressive as slavery. Morrison was well aware of such a state and wrote about it in *Beloved*.

In the context of slavery, black slaves’ bodies seemed to be machines that could be used to satisfy sexual desire and produce more cheap labour. The schoolteachers called Sethe and her children “breeder,” “pickaninnies,” “pony,” and “niggers”. Sethe told Mrs. Garner that she had been raped by the schoolteacher’s nephews, but they were not punished. Instead, Sethe’s back was scarred with whips. In the eyes of slaveholders, there was no difference between a slave and an animal. The schoolteacher’s nephews took Sethe’s milk, a cruel treatment that animalized her and reduced her to

the status of a cow. Breast rape was a special dehumanized form that drew on the unique history of early large scaled milking in America, which required separating cows from calves. From a mother's point of view, milk was used to raise children, was an integral part of her body, and was very important to a woman, but the schoolteacher's nephews snatched her milk from her body, which undoubtedly caused great trauma to Sethe physically and mentally.

The scar on Sethe's back became a cherry tree, but the mental pain was indelible. Those who were once slaves, and even their descendants, lived in the shadow of racial discrimination. Seth's daughter, Denver, lived alone, because "boys don't like me and girls don't either." [6] She had planned to go to school, but was isolated from the group, so she had to stay at home alone, with no friends and no one to communicate with her. Denver was not afraid of *Beloved's* ghost in the house, and for her, the ghost was her friend. For others, the ghost was frightening. For Sethe, it meant sadness. But for Dave, it meant loneliness.

Sethe's other daughter *Beloved* received little warmth and love from those around her and considered herself incomplete. Because of her insecurity, *Beloved* was always worried that one day she would be torn to pieces. She had two terrible dreams in which she exploded and was swallowed, reflecting her inner restlessness. She was very upset and anxious after having a tooth removed, and worried that her arms and toes would be separated from her body. She always thought that she was going to fall apart, and maybe one morning she woke up and found herself in pieces.

Baby Suggs also thought that she was made up of fragments. She regarded herself as a three-legged dog, and felt that slavery had destroyed every organ in her battered body. She hated and rejected this tired and crippled body, and she had nothing to use but her thoughts all over her body. White people took everything from her, such as labor, health, the children she gave birth to, self-respect as a human being, and the happy and free life she deserved when she was. She believed that nobody and nothing in the world caused more pain to black slaves than white people.

Racial discrimination deeply hurt black people, who could not choose whose children they were or whose children they had. They were slaves, fugitives, tools, but not people of personality. Even after abolishing slavery, the treatment of them was unjust, and they were still the oppressed class that was exploited all the time, which made them lose individual subjectivity and feel lonely. This kind of mental damage could not be easily healed.

3.2. Loss of Family Identity

Postcolonial theorists argued that the most fundamental problem faced by people in colonial areas was that of identity [7]. Like the other in American society, the loss of individual personality not only brought pain to a single person, but also led to the loss of family identity. Generally speaking, a family usually consists of different generations. Men and women were free to choose mates and form new families. The elders were serene and solemn, and children enjoyed a loving upbringing. Family identity was very important for every family member, because it was the basic obligation and right of family. The loss of it would bring great pain to the whole family.

Speaking of mother, in Sethe's memory, "I didn't see her but a few times out in the fields and once when she was working indigo. By the time I woke up in the morning, she was in line." [6] In a loveless environment, Sethe was not brought up by her mother. When Sethe grew up, she was sold to the Sweet Home and married Halle. Black people who were considered private property could not have love. They were bought, sold and controlled by slaveholders regardless of their own will. Baby Suggs was Halle's mother, who had eight children, but "every one of them gone away from me. Four taken, four chased." [6] Black people were deprived of their right to raise their children. They lost the ability of love, became numb, and thought that "the best thing was to love just a little bit." [6]

After Mr. Garner died, Mrs. Garner, the mistress of the Sweet Home, thought it was inappropriate for a white woman to be with so many black people. She invited a schoolteacher, who treated black people as animals. He measured their bodies with tools and taught them things they could not understand. One day, Sethe was shocked to hear him say, "I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don't forget to line them up." [6] The blatant discrimination gave her the idea of running away with her children. She sent her three children away

first, preparing to flee later. The schoolteacher's nephews found out about the plan and flogged pregnant Sethe and sucked her milk. Halle saw this situation and went mad. Sethe eventually escaped and, after a difficult journey, arrived at 124 Bluestone Road and lived happily with her daughter for a while. But soon after, the schoolteacher came, trying to take back Sethe, who was still fertile for at least a decade, and her daughter, who could work as a coolie. Out of deep love, Sethe killed her daughter. The daughter's death was poignant, but she believed that it was safer to send her daughter to God than to the Sweet Home. From then on, she was racked with a deep sense of guilt. The mental pain drained her vitality and almost took her life. Unlike other black people, Sethe's love was strong, but she was hurt by her strong love, which proved that black people could not keep their family identity, and numbness was the "wise" choice.

In addition to the distorted motherhood, fatherhood in the black family was also absent. Male slaves were deprived and distorted of their roles as brothers, husbands and sons. They were sent away or sold when they were very young, so they rarely had an opportunity to enjoy family love and could not take on family responsibilities. Adult male slaves did not have the right to freely choose their wives. Even if they were lucky enough to set up a family, they could not protect his family from the ravage of slavery. In the memory of Paul D, he never met his father, and had no recollection of his mother. He and his two half-brothers were sold to the Sweet Home and were never allowed to leave the plantation. They were single, without wives, children or families.

Halle had a wife, but was unable to protect his family. He yearned for family happiness and tried to build a complete family through his own efforts. Even on Sunday, he worked hard on the plantation to earn money and rescue his mother and had little time to look after his wife and children. While locked in the stable, he witnessed the brutal behaviour of the schoolteacher and his nephews toward Sethe, but he had no power to stop them and protect his wife from the inhuman humiliation. In his inner world, the strong ethical consciousness and inability to maintain his family identity made him lose face and break down mentally. Halle's insanity marked the psychological trauma brought by the failure of pursuing and protecting family identity.

Slavery was considered the most cruelly anti-family institution established by white people in African American history [8]. It was impossible for black people to fulfill their own responsibilities as fathers or mothers. The loss of family identity directly led to the destruction of black families. Slaves were brought up without mothers and fathers, and they were estranged from their relatives, partners and children.

3.3. Loss of National Culture

Culture was a system of customs, beliefs and ideas accepted and shared by people in a society or in a community. Cultural identity referred to the cultural group to which people belonged to. Culture represented the civilization of a race. In the body of a black man, an American, a black, two souls, two ideas, two incompatible thoughts were struggling, and the tenacious strength in the body protected itself from being torn apart [9]. For African Americans, African culture was their native culture, but they had gradually lost contact with their native culture since they were shipped to the American continent as slaves hundreds of years ago. Leaving their homeland, they were placed in a strange environment different from their own culture. Under the great pressure of the unfamiliar environment, black people made great efforts to assimilate into the new culture.

Names were an integral part of African culture. For Africans, names belonged not just to themselves, but to their families and tribes. When they died, they could not contact their ancestors without a name. But when they were brought to America, they were stripped of names and forced to accept names given by white people. Baby Suggs never knew her own name. Mr. Garner called her Jenny Whitlow, the surname of her former owner. When Halle redeemed her, she changed her name given by white people immediately. She was lucky to be able to choose a name for herself. Paul D, however, never got his own name. Although Mr. Garner claimed to treat slaves as human beings, he actually treated them as his own, naming them alphabetically and imposing his surname on them. For African Americans, the loss of names meant the loss of national identity and the rupture of cultural ties.

Black people lost not only their names but their language. As a symbol of a nation's culture, language played a very important role. When the West began its colonial expansion, it also brought its culture and language to the colonies. In contrast to black language, white people considered their own language to be noble and highly refined. They forbade slaves to learn the language of white people and use it in daily lives. By not using their mother tongue for a long time, black people naturally forgot their native language. Sethe's memory of her native language was unclear. "What Nan told her she had forgotten, along with the language she told it in." [6] The extinction of native language and the acceptance of colonizer's language made black people lose connection with African civilization and gradually identify with American civilization.

The cultural hegemony of colonial rule and slavery not only deprived black people of their names and languages, but also cut off the ties between the black communities. In African culture, the concept of community was very important. Bhabha pointed out that the history of individuals and their families was contained in the history of the whole nation. Black independence was meaningful only in the context of black collectivity and black culture. [10] Black people lived in a turbulent environment, and the relationship between family and community was very unstable. Spiritual dependence on community was more important than material dependence. The tragedy of Morrison's characters was their inability to integrate into the community. [11] When the schoolteacher came to take back Sethe and her daughter, no one in the community stood up for them. When Sethe was in prison, no one interceded for her. Sethe wanted to pour out her sense of guilt for killing her daughter *Beloved*, but no one listened carefully. House 124 was isolated from the community.

Black people were deprived of native names, the most immediate symbol of a person's connection to his ancestors and his race. What's more, black people were deprived of the right to use their native language and their ties with their native culture were cut off. The dissipation of collective consciousness and national culture made them become cultural orphans. They had to wander in loneliness and face the crisis of cultural identity. Without cultural identity, they became the other in both white and black cultures.

4. The Way Ahead

The indictment of colonialism is an important theme in Morrison's novels. She also expresses deep concern for the future of black people, arguing that if a black man under white rule can protect his own culture and become a civilized man, he needs to realize that the only way out is for him to prove the existence of black culture. Black people must struggle for their future, and the struggle is nonviolent and spiritual. In reconstructing their own culture and redefining their national identity, black people must learn to face history and re-establish strong community relations.

4.1. Face Up To History

History is cruel to black people, and everyone in *Beloved* tries to forget it. Sethe works hard to avoid the bad memories. Paul D keeps the past tightly shut in his tobacco box. No one wants to talk about the painful past, but the past does not let people off easily, and Sethe has to reminisce with Paul D. The history that people do not want to remember incarnates as the ghost of a *Beloved* tormenting everyone. No one can ignore the existence of history, facing history to make people strong.

Beloved is the embodiment of Sethe's dead daughter and the memory of slavery. She causes everyone's pain and heals them. These days spending with *Beloved* have helped Sethe regain her maternal feeling. Paul regains his ability to feel of life, and Denver comes out of her loneliness into the black community. It is a whole new life for everyone. Paul promises Sethe a future that she can find her worth. Sethe breaks free from the shackles of history, and Morrison ends this tale with a hopeful tone of misery.

Postcolonial cultural theorist Homi Bhabha emphasizes the importance of cultural identity. Memory is not a process of quiet introspection or retrospection. It is a painful process of reorganizing all the unspoken past and uncovering the present. Despite characters' constant efforts to avoid the past, the past continues to haunt black people. Black people do not want to mention history in their consciousness, but they do casually recall it. By remembering the past, Sethe begins to rediscover her

past. These understandings help her gain a free self that she can master. History is helpful, not destructive. In recalling history, black people have their own understanding of the past and their own cultural identity, instead of passively accepting what white people tell them. Before moving on to the future, black people should learn to face history. History makes men wise and allows the black people to re-establish their national identity.

In order to distinguish her idea of memory from the traditional one, Morrison creates a new term “rememory”. “Something just happens. I often feel like it’s my rememory. There are things you forget. And some things, you can never get over.” [1] Although memory is cruel and full of trauma, only in memory can reshape the black national culture.

4.2. Reconstruction of the Community

Toni Morrison often stresses the importance of collective unity for the black nation. In her opinion, only in a collective environment can black people understand and support and love each other, and “to be part of the community with other free black people, to love and be loved, to support and protect each other, to help each other.” [1] Only in such a black community can black people be truly happy and not be controlled or destroyed by white values.

Baby Suggs is a spiritual leader who works as a black pastor to unite and guide the black community. She calls on everyone to love himself. “In this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard.” [6]

Under the leadership of such a wounded but hopeful black woman, all black people are inspired. In the open space, everyone laughs together, cries together, dances and sings together. Baby Suggs brings black people together. However, everything changes after Sethe kills her daughter. There are no more parties in the open space and no communication between people. 124 is isolated, and Baby Suggs lays in bed, alone, waiting for death.

No one comes to visit 124, and Sethe’s family is banished from the community. No one knows exactly what happens there. When Sethe is tortured almost to death by *Beloved*, Denver decides to go into the community and asks for help. “Neither Sethe nor *Beloved* knew or cared about it one way or another. They were too busy rationing their strength to fight each other. So it was she who had to step off the edge of the world and die because if she didn’t, they all would.” [6] Denver comes out of the house after years of isolation to speak to the community about their difficulties. People help Sethe’s family, and eventually they band together and go to 124 to get rid of *Beloved* forever.

For Sethe, the 28 days of community life are 28 days of healing, free and pleasant days in which she can talk freely and not feel lonely. Life is hard, but life in the community is happy. Only a united community can prevent Sethe’s tragedy. Morrison believes that for all minority groups or those whose cultures are discriminated against, freedom and community are inseparable. The community provides a way for the black nation to survive and develop.

5. Conclusion

In order to preserve the integrity of a race’s culture and civilization, members of the race should shoulder the responsibility of inheriting and passing on their cultural essence. Out of love and responsibility, Toni Morrison broke the silence and revealed the plight of black people to readers. Although the story of *Beloved* took place years after slavery was abolished, black people were still haunted by it. They were alienated into the other and lost their individual subjectivity, family identity and national culture. If they wanted to break down the prejudice and make their own voice, they must reshape their national identity. To get rid of the influence of post-colonialism, black people needed to unite to learn from history, change the values given by white people, and show the world a new national image. This was of great significance for preserving national culture and promoting cultural diversity in modern society.

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