

The Writing of Self Reestablishment Journey of the Black Female Body in *Beloved*

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Beloved is one of the representative works of African American female writer Toni Morrison. This paper attempts to use the body related theory to interpret the series of changes in the black female body of Sethe, from being disciplined to resisting and then to rebuilding her identity. The body writing conveys the oppression of slavery and male chauvinism on black women. And it suggests how black women wake up their female consciousness and construct self discourse. Finally, it shows the significance of female body to the construction of black female identity.

Keywords: *Beloved*, black female, body

Introduction

Toni Morrison, an African American woman writer, has written many literary works focusing on black life. *Beloved* is a novel written by her in the 1980s. From the perspective of black women, this novel truly reproduces the tragic experience of black Americans under slavery. “Body” has always been an important theme in Morrison’s works. For example, Ying Weiwei studies the body political consciousness of different black female characters in Morris’s works to find out how they rebuild their female subjects.

Since the 20th century, the body has gradually received the attention of postmodern theory. Now, it is an important concept of modern literary criticism. Unlike it in the past western philosophy, which has long defined the body as the “other”, the body has become the foundation of human existence through the research of famous philosophers such as Nietzsche and Foucault. The existence of body in literary texts is becoming more and more obvious. In discipline and punishment, Michel Foucault explains the relationship between body and discourse power in detail. Foucault pointed out that “power works through the body, which constantly constructs and shapes people into subjects conforming to certain social norms; human body is integrated into the structure of knowledge and power, and power discipline and punish the body through discourse” (1920, p. 257).

Morrison tries to convey the true experiences of black women in history through the writing of their body. Her works also show her thoughts on the current living situation of black women and even the whole race. This paper will take the body as a perspective and combine relevant theories to explore the series of changes experienced by Sethe’s female body at different stages, the resistance and behavior of her body, and then study how black women complete their identity construction with their bodies.

Body's Discipline

The body of black women bears the double oppression of race and gender. Morris's description of the female body truly records the history of black women being disciplined and abused.

In the novel, as a plantation in the south of the United States, "Sweet Home" becomes a place where the female body receives discipline. Plantations are physical places where black female exist. Foucault once pointed out: "in any society, the human body is controlled by extremely severe powers. Those powers impose various pressures, restrictions or obligations on it" (Wang, 2006, p. 111). In the era when slavery was prevalent in the United States, black women were constantly controlled and trained by the white people in order to make black women become the labor force and reproductive machine that the white people wanted.

In the beginning, "Sweet Home" controlled the slaves in a secret way. As a slave owner, Mr. Ghana was gentle and tried to have friendly communication with black slaves. However, this did not change the nature of slavery. Because of the kind intentions of the white people, Sethe, the protagonist, did not feel that the life of "Sweet Home" was unacceptable. Power constantly played its role, and the black female began to unconsciously accept the discipline of power in space. To some extent, Sethe's female body has become bodies manipulated and controlled by power and authority.

In this way, power controls the physical behavior of black women through space to complete the discipline of them. The plantation has formed a mechanism for the exercise and operation of power, and power operates in this space and is constantly strengthened. Through their own power, the white slave owners constantly monitored and controlled the black females in the space, and completed the control and discipline of the black body. If a black woman makes mistakes, she will be severely punished. The punishment of "Sweet Home" is to bring a bit to the black slaves who made mistakes. After wearing them, the black slaves could not speak and kept suffering, and felt ashamed in front of other black people. After being unable to speak, the punished slave will go mad like an animal and gradually lose his reason. In the process of punishment, slaves were obviously dehumanized. Sethe had received such punishment, and even after a long time, she could still feel the torture she had suffered. This is also a metaphor for black women gradually losing their voice in the society. In the way of punishment, black women have been shrouded in the shadow of power. Black women's bodies are constantly regulated in this space full of power relations.

In order to better control black women, racial violence occurs here in various ways. Sethe hears that the school teacher uses her body to educate his two nephews. "I told you to put her human attributes on the left and her animal attributes on the right. Don't forget to arrange them" (Morrison, 2007, p. 223). The school teacher materialized Sethe's female body by means of language. She is not regarded as a woman but a tool. Even Sethe was severely whipped by two nephews of the school teacher with a cowhide whip, because she complained to Mrs. Ghana. This is a direct act of violence on the body by whites against black females. After the torture, Sethe even left an obvious wound that could not be healed. Sethe's bloody wound is the most direct description of the white people's atrocities. The racial violence of white people against black female has now become a physical mark on her body, which symbolizes the painful experience and records the process of black females' suffering.

In addition to the racial violence suffered by black women, they also bear the harm brought by male chauvinism. In the novel, the school teacher and his two nephews commit sexual violence against Sethe after coming to the plantation. Sexual violence brings not only physical humiliation but also psychological humiliation to Sethe by the boys and the teacher. Through this behavior, they established their unrestricted authority over her.

Symbolically, it also highlights the unbridled power exerted by the disseminators of white supremacy on their black female slaves (Barnett, 1997, p. 426). Black women become the targets of men's sexual desire. Sethe was already pregnant. In the process of sexual violence, two white youths also cruelly sucked Sethe's milk. Here, milk is a symbol of Sethe's motherhood. The white man took away the milk from the black mother, which further hurt the black's body. Black mothers cannot breastfeed their offspring with milk, so they cannot fulfill their mother's nature. The physical integrity of black mothers was destroyed. After escaping from the plantation, Sethe also experienced the pain of being abandoned by her husband. The incompleteness of the family also hurt Sethe.

Black female body has become the object of racial and sexual violence. The common oppression of race and gender makes black women silent. Through the writing of the body, the black women's body subjected to violence and discipline has become a historical memory of the black women's suffering. The image of black women is completely objectified. Their disciplined and suppressed bodies lead to the loss of the subjectivity. Black women lose their power discourse and gradually become the "other" in the society.

Body's Resistance

On the one hand, the body is the object of power discourse, but on the other hand, it is also the source of individual resistance to power. After suffering from multiple violence, Sethe finally decided to flee the plantation. Foucault believes that "there is no power relationship without resistance. Resistance is formed exactly where the power relationship can be exercised, so resistance is more real and effective... The existence of resistance has never left power" (1920, p. 79). Even if the black females are constantly controlled and punished in the plantation, their bodies were actively fighting against the power mechanism of the plantation since they decided to flee.

In the process of escaping, Sethe faced various difficulties. She was pregnant, but she had to flee to her mother-in-law's house alone. She suffered from thirst and hunger, and even gave birth to her child on the road. Her strong will and strong body helped her to reach her destination successfully. Although Sethe's body had been under control before, after she escaped from the plantation, she was able to consciously resist the control of slavery. When black females exercised power with their bodies, they began to pursue their own freedom. Later, Sethe took the initiative to make various acts of resistance.

Sethe broke away from the physical restrictions imposed on her by the plantation, but the shadow of slavery continued to follow her. Until one day, the school teacher and the slave hunter appeared at her present home. When she faced the white people who had hurt her all the time again, she made one of the most controversial acts in the whole book—she killed her own child. Although this is an extremely cruel act, Sethe's only purpose is to make her children not be hurt by racial violence like her. Her behavior shocked those white people. This is the impact of black body discourse on white supremacy. Her goal was achieved, and she regained her control over her body. From obedience to resistance, Sethe's body clearly conveys her transformation.

However, her behavior also brought harm to herself. The ghost of Beloved constantly appears in her life, and even comes in flesh. There is a crack on the neck of Beloved. This mark, like Sethe and her mother, is the result of a painful act that recalls the past. Black women still need to face these tragic memories at home. Under such circumstances, Sethe's body and spirit were constantly tortured.

At this time, she can no longer rely solely on herself to resist the harm of racism as in the past. So the power of the black community became her support. The black community played a unique role in the process of the American blacks' struggle. When the individual resistance is weak, Morrison emphasizes the collective strength of the black community. *Beloved* also reveals Morrison's concept of community, that is, the black American

family must coexist with and interact with a specific black community (Zhao, 2015, p. 48). Other people in the original black community do not have a close relationship with Sethe. But when Sethe needed help, other black women came to her home to help her. The collective strength of the community began to repair her body.

When Sethe faced white people for the second time, the language of her body changed again. When Mr. Baldwin, the employer of her daughter Denver, came to pick up Denver to work, he appeared in front of the gate of 124, a place that had not been visited by white people for a long time. Seeing the white people in front of her house, Sethe recalled that day when she had to kill Beloved. At this time, Sethe's spirit has been tortured by Beloved, and is nearly broken. However, when she faced the white people standing outside her house, she did not choose to end her child's life as in the past. Instead, she rushed out to fight Mr. Baldwin. Her resistance at this time was to directly confront the white people and protect her children. This time, Sethe is also using her own body to resist the shadow of slavery that has been hurting her. She rebelled in the form of body and behavior. While she continued to resist the harm of racism, her body also conveyed the desire of the black community for freedom.

Through the description of Sethe's many acts of resistance, she gradually recovered her body's subjectivity. Black females succeeded in regaining control over their bodies by using their active body behaviors. When the power of the individual is too weak, the power of the black community begins to gather and form a strong collective consciousness. It can support every woman to tide over difficulties and face the tragic memories brought by racism.

Body's Re-establishment

As Sethe fought against the shadow of slavery with her body, her female consciousness was constantly reshaped. Under the condition that the body is controlled, violated, and disciplined, black females can also exercise their own rights, rebuild their derogated subject consciousness, and thus re-establish their identity.

According to Morrison, black women need to return to their motherhood, inherit and carry forward the tradition of caressing, feeding, and nurturing with black mothers' bodies, and finally realize the construction of black women's subjectivity. Originally, Sethe's milk was taken away by the white people, and her body as a black mother was destroyed. She's always brooding about it. When she was on the way to escape, with the help of a white female runaway slave, Amy, she successfully gave birth to her daughter. And Sethe named her after this white woman. This physical change has changed her enormously. She successfully fulfilled her mission as a mother. The original destroyed physical integrity is satisfied by childbirth. This is also an important sign of the establishment of the body's subjective consciousness.

In addition, the scar on Sethe's back, which had always been a symbol of pain, was redefined by female discourse. This scar is a symbol of white people's cruel violence on black females. However, Amy re-imagined the terrible scar as a bitter cherry tree, and even the tree grew many branches and buds, which contained full vitality. Sethe accepts her idea. The transformation from scar to the bitter cherry tree also symbolizes the regaining of Sethe's vitality after completing her mission as a mother. She began to understand her oppressed and enslaved body, and at the same time, she had a new understanding of her own body, which had great enlightenment for her to get rid of the limitations of her past on her body.

Establishing identity is a long-term pursuit of blacks. Their home is the place for several generations of black women to build their own identities. The house, 124 Bluestone Road, is located in a free black community. It becomes a place for black women to build their own right to speak. Originally, black women accepted the

double oppression of race and gender, and their bodies became silent. However, they have never given up the construction of their own power discourse. Black body now becomes a way to express their feeling and build their existence. The main members of 124 are Sethe and her mother-in-law and daughter. The other male members, Sethe's two sons, could not bear the harassment of ghosts and left here. 124 gradually became a place dominated by women. Then Paul D came to 124, and he tried to destroy the gender structure. When a man poses a threat to the existence of women's rights, the united female power collectively expels him. In such an environment, black women constantly establish their own female identity and power discourse to resist the harm of racism and male power.

Baby Suggs has very clear self-identity and self-awareness. Her self comes from her resistance to white supremacy and her acceptance of black traditional culture. Her name is not given by the white, but by the black. It is in this way that Baby Suggs can become the spiritual leader of the community and the role of uniting the black community in the 124. Her body affects others, and the black community is clearer that they have taken back the ownership of the body. After Sethe came to 124, her self-consciousness also appeared in the process of resisting racism. Sethe began to use her body to express her self-consciousness, and had a tough resistance with the male-dominated society. When she faced Paul D's proposal for childbirth, she was able to refuse him. She is no longer the silent woman who can only passively accept the harm of male power in the past, but has her own right to speak and refuse. Her changes are closely related to her positive language of her body.

The completion of the construction of black women's subject lies not only in Sethe's use of correct body consciousness to find herself, but also in her ability to influence her daughter with her body. At the end of the novel, as a young black woman, Denver gradually grows up. She can take the initiative to go out of the house to take care of her family and seek the help of people in the community. It suggests that she can communicate with the outside world with her own body. "The world will always acquire its various explanatory meanings from the perspective of the body. It is the product of the dynamic abandonment of the body" (Wang, 2006, p. 14). Denver can actively communicate with the outside world, and her body is her tool to communicate. She is the symbol of the future of the black community. The spirit of the last generation is inherited and sublimated in the next generation.

Morrison tells the change and growth of black women through their efforts to rebuild themselves. This kind of body writing presents the objective existence of black women's body. Black women's self is emphasized. They rebuild their power discourse and establish their own identity. Under the double discrimination of race and gender, black women's bodies still constantly seek for their self-liberation.

Conclusion

In this novel, by writing about the black female body, the author presents the tragic history of American black women suffering, and also exposes the cruel nature of racial violence. The female body writing connects the past with the present. It makes history concrete and allows people to read history in another view. Sethe's female body also connects the experiences of several generations of black females. Through Sethe's body, the author expresses her support for the resistance of the black women. She hoped that black women could seek equality and freedom through the liberation of body and complete the construction of female subject.

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