

# The United Power of Communal Voice in *Beloved*

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Polyphonic narrative refers to the narrative structure constituted by the consciousness of multiple independent voices in the text, and Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* is under the narrative framework with the common characteristics of polyphonic narrative, which provides a carrier for individuals to express themselves freely, and then forms the polyphonic narrative structure of multiple voices. This kind of polyphonic narrative, which respects individual thoughts, makes it possible for black women and black groups, who are always in the center of oppression and hegemony, and in the marginalized position of being suppressed and bullied, to obtain the possibility of multiple expressions. The cathartic function and healing power of voice demonstrated in this novel deserve sustained and in-depth study by readers.

**Keywords:** polyphony, the power of voice, emotional catharsis

## Introduction

Set in the post-slavery era, Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* tells the tale of societal healing and regeneration. In numerous of her works, Morrison used the narrative device of "remembrance" to weave a parallel plot set during the antebellum era. The story of Sethe, the protagonist of the book, has the required background provided by this parallel environment. Denver, a newborn daughter of Sethe, a runaway slave, visits her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, at her house. Sethe already has three children living in the house: two sons and a small daughter she calls "crawling-already?" After nearly a month of freedom, Sethe and her four kids begin to lose faith that her husband, Baby Suggs's youngest son Halle, who is also an escaped slave, will soon arrive. Halle has already paid for the liberty of Baby Suggs. Despite her elderly age and physical weariness upon her liberation, Baby Suggs used her last resources to serve the community and follow her passion of becoming a preacher. When Schoolteacher comes to take her and her children away, Sethe decides to take her own life because she believes that death is the only way to escape a life of servitude. "Crawling-already?" is the only person she kills before Stamp Paid, the old man who drove her across the Ohio River to Baby Suggs's house, stops her. She calls the deceased kid "Beloved" and recalls the preacher's words to those present at the burial as she makes arrangements for a headstone to be placed on the cemetery. "Dearly Beloved". Sethe was shunned by the community after the murder, and the rest of the narrative follows her path toward spiritual healing and restoration—a journey that eventually involves the community as a whole. The direction of Baby Suggs's spirit and her preaching lessons—especially memories of her sermons in the Clearing, which she claimed as her pulpit—are the only paths to healing for Sethe and the community.

## Polyphony

### Theory Basis

According to Hegel (1979, p. 27), the “central content of music is subjective, and the form of expression is also subjective”, and music is an effective way to construct the lyrical subject or create subjective lyricism. From this point of view, the combination of novel and music undoubtedly provides an advantageous condition for the novel to construct the lyrical subject. The protagonists of the novel are not only narrative subjects, but also lyrical subjects; especially the music works created by each of them are the embodiment of emotions and ideals. To a certain extent, these musical works can be regarded as the inner confession and emotional outpouring of the main characters, which naturally become the cohesive and explosive point of the novel’s emotions. The shaping of the lyrical subjects not only makes the novel overflowing with a strong emotional atmosphere, but also strengthens the lyrical effect of the novel.

Bakhtin’s literary theory of polyphony describes how confusing narrative can be as a result of its centrifugal principles of indirect, sarcastic, ironic discourse, and other intertextual processes (Zhou, 2002). Bakhtin refers to the individual acoustic voice (phoné), articulated in tension with an official centripetal, unifying, and totalitarian version of narration. Polyphony—also as musical technique—always implies more than one voice, and works by including a latent other.

Bakhtin points out that a writer, as a narrator, that is, a storyteller, is not an all-knowing God, and cannot see everything so clearly, and tell each story so completely, because he himself may be cut off and contradictory deep in his own soul, and may unconsciously reveal his inner contradictions in the story when he is designing the characters and telling the plot (Yang, 2024). In his character design and plotting, he may unconsciously reveal his inner contradictions in the story, which is not only a bad thing, but therefore can reveal himself more deeply. Polyphonic fiction, in fact, refers to a dialog between multiple personalities of the author himself. When novel creators set up this kind of polyphonic novel creation concept, their works are bound to better reflect the real state of human nature in the real society (Gan, 2022).

He summarizes it: “The essence of polyphony lies in the fact that the voices remain independent, as such, are combined in a unity of a higher order than homophony” (Gan, 2022, p. 91). In addition to being a characteristic of new art, the theory of “polyphony” is a distinct cognitive discourse and style of thinking that exhibits a special charm in closely examining people’s spiritual and survival states. It also exemplifies Bakhtin’s broad perspective and dialectical thinking as a cultural philosopher. According to some scholars, the theory of “polyphony” moves from criticism and novel theory to aesthetics and back to philosophy.

### The Polyphonic Narrative

Character is no longer an object given a perfect form by the author’s artistic observation, no longer a silent slave created by Zeus, but a free man with independence, subjectivity, and therefore creativity, with his own consciousness and his own. The juxtaposition of characters’ consciousness and author’s consciousness is the condition for breaking through “monologue” to form “polyphony”. The main idea of “polyphonic” novels is not to unfold the storyline and character’s destiny, but to show the different independent consciousnesses of those who have their own worlds, have the same value, and have equal status. What “polyphonic” novels pursue is to put people and people (author and characters), consciousness and consciousness on the same plane, to show that the world is a stage where many people with living thoughts and feelings are observing and moving, and a stage where many independent voices with distinctive personalities are exchanging and competing. So, in this new

situation where characters and authors are on an equal footing, where the consciousness of the characters and the consciousness of the authors are both self-authoritative, and therefore the unified consciousness of the authors is not possible to talk about, how can there be exchanges between the independent consciousnesses? How can the voices of subjectivity compete with each other? According to Bakhtin, this is the “counterpoint” between consciousnesses and the “dialog” between voices (Zou, 2021). The juxtaposition of the character’s consciousness and the author’s consciousness on the same plane actually provides a guarantee for the “counterpoint” between the consciousnesses. The “polyphonic” novel, that is to say, no longer governed by the author’s unified consciousness, the juxtaposition of independent consciousnesses, and the contention of subjective voices are “counterpoint” novels, “dialogues” novels. In this kind of novel, the relationship between the author and the characters, and between the characters and the characters, is a “strictly practiced and consistent dialogical” relationship. For the author, the character is not a third party “he”, not to mention “I”, but “you” as a dialog partner. The voice is of a living human being with the will and the ability to interact and coexist with his creator on a par. In the case of the characters, the author’s intervention is minimized (Cao, 2008).

### **The Healing Power of Communal Catharsis**

The author’s examination here is what roles Baby Suggs and other women in this novel played in the restorative process for both Sethe and the community at large. She explores Baby Suggs’s spiritual leadership, as well as that of other women in the novel, by examining the role of music, sound, utterance, and melody, which serve to establish a communal sensibility.

#### **Dialog and Monologue**

The whole novel is almost entirely composed of two narrative forms: dialog and monologue, and each narrative voice is equally important. They are both independent and in harmony with each other, fully demonstrating their respective existence value and aggregation power, leaving a huge imagination space for readers to interpret the “sound” behind the “sound” of the words. This is the core connotation of “polyphony”. Polyphony is a term borrowed from music theory. The original meaning of polyphony is that there are more than two main themes in a piece of music. If a piece of music is harmonized as a whole, then the two main themes are not expressed and unfolded separately, but have a dialogic relationship. Otherwise, it is a monologue. Music in the classical sense is typically a single main theme, and the beauty of music comes from harmony.

Susan Lange argues that all forms of art are symbolic representations of human emotions, and that not only do forms of art and human emotions logically coincide, but forms of art also share the same structure as forms of human life, and that music, painting, dance, literature, and other artistic disciplines share the same structure and form. It is for this reason that great writers attach great importance to the structure of novels. Milan Kundera believes that the subtlest art of the novelist lies in the structure of the novel. Milan Kundera’s novels can be analyzed by analogy with musical works in terms of formal structure.

#### **Harmony Sound for Freedom**

In order to express emotion, modern novels have tried various methods, among which the musicalization of novels is undoubtedly the most important method, because “what is moved by music is the deepest inner life of the subject; music is the art of mood, it is directly aimed at the mood” (Wang, 2019, p. 330).

Music is the art of mood, and it directly addresses the mood. The degree of novel’s musicalization has become an important criterion for judging novels (Hegel, 1979). Since “music can be regarded as the most natural

art of lyricism”, writers add music elements in novels undoubtedly help to increase the lyrical effect. Therefore, music has an unignorable significance to the lyrical transformation of novels.

As a standard part of Morrison’s narrative constructions, music has been employed in Morrison’s novel to varying degrees, especially in *Beloved*. Jazz is the most obvious example, in which Morrison personifies the music, creating, in effect, another character.

Sound serves as a kind of discourse in the novel, even though it is unarticulated, unformed, and undefined. The legitimacy of this sound is anchored in the ancestral heritage, in their African foreparents’ art and practice of storytelling, which incorporated both sound and word.

According to Reed (2007), the significance of sound, which is expressed through cries and utterances, is greater than that of recognizable music. She places the women’s activities in the novel within the framework of womanist theology, which takes into account the distinct experiences of black women spiritual leaders. Sounds, like women preaching, telling stories, crying, and moaning, become the ways by which the women in the book express their spiritual power and practice feminine theology as well as the means by which the community is restored. In the end, Baby Suggs’ spiritual leadership offers the direction required for the society to achieve its salvation objective—Sethe, the heroine of the book—by healing her.

### **Voice Power of Womenism**

Song, unlike the written word, which is often perceived as permanent and unchanging, allows for change as new versions arise with the successive generations who hear it (Reed, 2007). The importance of song as a maternal signifier rests not only with the tendency of women in some cultures, particularly mothers, to be the oral historians (storytellers) of a community, but also it stands in opposition to the male-identified written word. While song is crucial to the black community as a whole, the responsibility of passing on a song from one generation to the next is often seen as primarily the role of the mother. Song substituted for words expresses a needed feminine sensibility in opposition to the masculine implications of words. Even more specifically, song suggests the maternal, the closest association with the feminine, and the most common representation of the feminine within the novel.

The emphasis on communal restoration is the result of several gendered implications of spirituality, which I have already suggested are part of the womanist lens. The feminine represents a continuum of communal ideals in contrast to the masculine, which represents discontinuity. Throughout the novel, the “goodness” of Baby Suggs’s life-restoring spirit contends with the life-depleting “evil” of *Beloved*’s spirit.

Baby Suggs is the figure responsible for aiding the community members in bridging sound and memory in order to achieve salvation. Acknowledged in the community as a preacher of the word, she “accept[ed] no title of honor before her name, but allow[ed] a small caress after it, she became an unchurched preacher, one who visited pulpits and opened her great heart to those who could use it” (Reed, 2007, p. 56). In doing this, Morrison gives new dimension to the importance of women and the role of the maternal, which remains essential to this narrative; we see this in Sethe’s maternal position. But more significant, we see Baby Suggs not only in the role of nurturer to her family, but also in the role of spiritual nurturer to an entire community.

### **Black Group Catharsis**

The oppressive slaveholder narrative denies Paul D. the status of discursive subjectivity. In order for him to find a voice, Morrison endowed him with a love of singing, and song became his alternative to language and his

way of speaking about the suffering of slavery. Black music is an important form of African American oral culture, which can be broadly divided into three categories: labor music, religious music, and popular music, and is characterized by openness, improvisation, and audience participation. After a failed attempt to escape from Sweet Home, Paul D. was taken to a horse chewer like an animal. Language ensures the existence of an individual as a member of a human group, and to be deprived of language means to be deprived of the most basic human dignity. Paul D., who has suffered a great blow to his humanity, watches as a cockerel called "Mister" walks around in front of him, enjoying more freedom than he does.

At 124, Paul D. refused to sing the crew head song he learned in prison:

Lay my head on the railroad line,  
Train come along, pacify my mind.  
If I had my weight in lime.  
I'd whip my captain till he went stone blind. (Reed, 2007, p. 70)

He felt that such flat songs were too violent to be sung in the context of 124 family life. However, "he could no longer sing the 'Storm on the Water' that he used to sing under the 'Sweet Home' tree, so he contented himself with the humming of 'Hi, hi, hi, hi'" (Reed, 2007, p. 66). Songs are his primary mode of textual narration, as the refusal to sing the song of "Sweet Home's" fervent hope and the flatulent song of prison violence form a closed text. The listener is deprived of the opportunity to participate in the narrative, and Paul D. himself is deprived of the opportunity to improvise new texts. As a result, after a period of residence in 124, he and Seth were not able to truly rebuild their family life. Ultimately, the call-and-response model prompts Paul D. to use the openness of the spoken text to repetition and alteration in the dialogic interplay of different texts to create a new open text by combining the songs of Sweet Home with the songs of the prison:

Bare feet and chamomile sap,  
Took off my shoes; took off my hat.  
Bare feet and chamomile sap.  
Gimme back my shoes; gimme back my hat.  
Lay my head on a potato sack,  
Devil sneak up behind my back.  
Steam engine got a lonesome whine.  
Love that woman till you got stone blind.  
Stone blind; stone blind.  
Sweet Home gal make you lose your mind. (Shi, 2010, p. 69)

Paul D.'s new song combines the two, with the two texts revising each other. Prison's "My head on the railroad tracks, the train comes and runs over my thoughts" is changed to "My head on the potato pocket sleeps" and "Sweet Home's a girl to make your heart go haywire!" (Shi, 2010, p. 65). The same "stone blind" has a diametrically opposed meaning in the two songs. The first song shows hatred for the "Captain" while the second song shows love for Seth. At the end of the story, Paul D., through the interaction of the texts, makes Seth change the exclusive text of "she is the most precious thing to me" and start to understand that "he is the most precious thing". He realizes that he and Seth "need a tomorrow" and therefore "he wants to put his story together with hers" (Shi, 2010, p. 67). This shows that Paul D. has learned to use the potential of interactive texts to build an intimate and beneficial relationship with his audience by putting his humiliating story together with Seth's "story". This shows that Paul D. has learned to use interactive texts to build an intimate and beneficial relationship with

his audience by putting his own story together with Seth's "story" of "too much love". They rebuild subjectivity in the open space of the spoken text, in the interaction between the text of the self and the text of the other.

The decentered nature of black music allows the listener to participate in improvisation, and listener participation is the centralized mode of the black English spoken word tradition. It is from the participation of the listener's favorites that Dan Pod is inspired to create, to use his imagination, and to complete the story of his birth.

## Conclusion

Polyphonic narrative enables the novel to get rid of the monologue-type expression under the specific main idea, and also shows the readers a more diversified dialog structure and collision of ideas, but this narrative device is not easy to control and grasp. The Favored One abandons the traditional omniscient narrative mode and constructs a relatively free and open polyphonic narrative system by effectively refining the commonalities of polyphonic narrative. In the midst of it, communal restoration, the primary underpinning of Morrison's novel, ultimately takes place in a collective performance of the text.

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