

# “The New History” in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and the Construction of the Black’s Subjectivity

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## Abstract

Toni Morrison is a famous contemporary American writer who mainly focuses her attention on the life of the black: their history as well as their spiritual world. In her highly acclaimed novel *Beloved*, Morrison consciously sets African Americans’s past and their present living situation into her work, for she intends to make use of her literary discourse to reproduce “A New History”—the true history of the American black people that was once veiled by the American white’s mainstream society. In this way, she hopes to cure the psychological trauma of the black and call on her people to look for their lost culture root and reconstruct their ethnic consciousness. So this article will apply the theory of new historicism to analyze how Morrison reveals the pathetic history of American black and the cracks in colonialism and hegemony in *Beloved*, thus subverting the master discourse and breaking down the black’s marginalized identity, and finally reconstructing Afro-American’s culture and their subjectivity.

**Keywords:** Tony Morrison, *Beloved*, The New History, reconstruction of Afro-American’s culture and their subjectivity

## 1. Introduction

Toni Morrison (1931–), the famous contemporary American writer, received her highest compliment when she was named winner of the 1993 Nobel Prize for Literature. She is the first black American and the eighth woman to be cited for the prestigious award since its inception in 1901. Toni Morrison’s works constantly focus on the life of the black, their history as well as their spiritual world. Morrison consciously set African Americans’s past and their present living situation into her work. For she intends to make use of her literary discourse to reproduce “A New History”—the true history of the American black people that was once veiled by the American white’s mainstream society. In this way, she hopes to cure the psychological trauma of the black and call on her people to look for their lost culture root and reconstruct their ethnic consciousness.

Morrison’s widely acclaimed fifth novel, *Beloved*, explores the hardships endured by a former slave woman and her family during the slavery and the Reconstruction eras. Part history, part ghost story and part historical fiction, the novel also seeks to understand the impact of slavery, both on the psychology of individuals and on the larger patterns of culture and history. The publication of the novel drew the attention of many scholars of different literary schools and they tried to interpret the novel from different perspectives.

In the west, some critics center on the historical trauma and psychological healing process of the black people. For example, in the essay *The Ghosts of Slavery: Historical Reading on Toni Morrison’s Beloved* (1992), Linda Krumholz regards *Beloved* as a process of psychological healing and recovery by forcing its characters to confront and remember the past. In *Selfhood and Community: Psychoanalysis and Discourse in Beloved* Jennifer Fitzgerald argues that deprived of pre-Oedipal bonding with mothers or caregivers, African Americans can only learn to mother themselves through reciprocal self-love. And Jill Matus approaches Morrison’s *Beloved* as a form of cultural memory concerned with obscured or erased history. Other critics also make research on its controversial theme such as infanticide, maternal love and force, freedom and maternal love, etc. For example, Roxanne R. Reed’s article “The Restorative Power of Sound: A Case for Communal Catharsis in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*” examines the spiritual leadership of BabySuggs and the other women in the novel *Beloved* by examining the role of music, sound, utterance, and melody, which serve to establish a communal sensibility. Trudier Harris discusses the controversial theme “ownership” in *Beloved* in his book *Fiction and*

*Folklore: the Novels of Toni Morrison*. As Harris states that Toni Morrison makes clear where ownership leaves off and possession begins in the psychologically warping system called slavery in *Beloved*. And In the article “A Maternal Discourse of Redemption: Speech and Suffering in Morrison’s *Beloved*”, Colleen Carpenter Cullinian defines the maternal not in terms of gender, but rather in terms of who is willing to do the maternal work. She argues that Baby Suggs is leading those who listen to begin to grow into authentic self-love, something for which their experience in slavery and even out of it has not provided.

Chinese critics have also been probing into Morrison and her *Beloved* from different perspectives. Among them, Professor Wang Shouren pioneers in approaching Toni Morrison and her works. He systematically studies Morrison’s works in the book *Sex, Race and Culture: Toni Morrison and American Literature during 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. He points out that it is only in a healthy society that people have the courage to confront the history correctly, no matter how dark it used to be. We will have bright future if we can face the past bravely. And In the article “An Interpretation of the Metaphorical Meanings of the Names of the Black in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*”, Pan Huixia explores the relationship between the slavery and names of the slaves. As she states that Morrison gives on purpose no first name for some characters in *Beloved* and for other characters no last name. It hints that in the slavery the Afro-American slaves are in sub-status in the society. And In “Eternal Myth: An Interpretation of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*”, Zhenghui notes that Morrisn adopts many myths in *Beloved*. As he points out that the floating water gives black people a sense of security and helps them to escape from the slavery. Rivers mean redemption and the Ohio River symbols redemption of the characters.

From the above research on the novel, we know that many scholars worldwide have analyzed the novel in various perspectives, but few have studied *Beloved* by probing the interconnection between literary discourse and cultural and historical narration. So this article will apply the theory of new historicism to analyze how Morrison reveals the pathetic history of American black and the cracks in colonialism and hegemony in *Beloved*, thus subverting the master discourse and breaking down the black’s marginalized identity, and finally reconstructing Afro-American’s culture and their subjectivity.

## 2. The Writing of Personal Historical Trauma to Reproduce the Black People’s Loss of Subjectivity

As a black novelist with strong ethnic awareness, Morrison’s writing is naturally influenced by the critical theory of new historicism, which is opposed to orthodox historiography because of its concentration on political and diplomatic events recorded by the hegemonic discourse of the dominant society, thus New Historicism can be seen as repeating a historical past in its own universal terms. Morrison is not interested in writing a conventional historical novel, for she knows the masks of conquest of the American hegemonic discourse. The goal of her fiction is not just to recover details of African American history, but to choose which details are useful for the community in the struggle to create a past that can enable African Americans to have a livable life in the present and future. The unconventional historicity of *Beloved* is directly linked to Morrison’s improvisational exploration of alternative concepts and forms for reconstructing African American history. From historical point of view, since the first group of blacks was sent to America, they have been deprived of cultural connection with the old world and of the system of social support and oppressed economically and ideologically by colonialist, which results in African slaves’ forgetting their native history and culture, the weakening of their national consciousness and the loss of subjectivity (Note 1). The loss of subjectivity has a devastating influence on African Americans. They have to repress their colonial memories. Their national culture has been destroyed by colonialist cultural infiltration. African-American national consciousness has gradually been weakened, even in a declining plight in conflict between two different cultures.

Black people lost their subjectivity in the process of colonialism. They who has immediate experience with the process is reluctant to revisit memories of the past because it is painful to remember the past permeated with racial violence, both physical and psychological. *Beloved* is a novel in remembering the “[d]isremembered and unaccounted for”. (Note 2) For the former slaves in the novel, the past is a burden that they desperately and willfully try to forget, which is, to borrow from Gandhi, “the repression of colonial memories”. (Note 3)

So In *Beloved*, Morrison reproduces the scenes of Sethe’s childhood in a way resembling film editing, Black men and women’s songs and dances that Sethe remembers from her childhood originate in Africa. Sethe recalls how

...sometimes they danced the antelope. The men as well as the ma’ams, one of whom was certainly her own. They shifted shapes and became something other. Some unchained, demanding others whose feet knew her pulse better than she did. (Note 4)

Sethe understood the language they used at that time, however, several years later she can neither remember nor repeat her native language. The loss of language represents the kind of cultural devastation suffered by the slaves. It is thus clear that colonialist's cultural strategy leads to black slaves' amnesia concerning African native language and traditional culture.

Name is essential for black people in traditional African culture. When Sethe hears the preacher say "Dearly Beloved" at the funeral, she decides to engrave it on the baby's headstone as the name of her daughter. Sethe does not have enough money to pay for the text wholly; she pays for the inscription in this tombstone by having sex with the engraver—"Ten minutes for seven letters". (Note 5) Though she could have both words but she thinks she has got the very word that matters. She could not leave the baby buried without a name because a name is among the most precious of all African American possessions for it stands for an identity.

However, since black people were sold to America and reduced to slaves, they have been deprived of their African names which are replaced with code names given by colonialists. In *Beloved*, Paul A, Paul F and Paul D are brothers, who are named by their owner. Those names were suffixed by only an initial for differentiation. They are distinguished by a letter and no more. Blacks have always suffered their nameless. They did not have names because they were always named after their masters which were given to them with indifference and did not represent any meaning for them. Moreover, the brothers' last name—Garner—is that of their owner. It thus marks them as the property of another. The slaves, who lost their African names, can not be accepted by the whites and lose the connection with their own culture, which make the black lonely and helpless.

In *Yearnings*, Bell Hooks writes about black subjectivity as "an oppositional worldview, a consciousness, an identity, a standpoint that exists not only as that struggle which also opposes dehumanization but as that movement which enables creative, expansive self-actualization". (Note 6) So it can be seen that the search for Afro-American subjectivity has been always one of outstanding characteristics of American black literature. Thus, through the consciousness of Sethe, Morrison reveal the cracks in the white's mainstream discourse, thus represents the black people's loss of subjectivity.

### 3. The Power of Rememory to Reveal the Truth of Afro-American Slavery

In a 1989 interview with Bonnie Angelo of Time Magazine, Morrison discussed the desire of her nation to repress the memory of slavery. According to Morrison, the enslavement of Africans and African Americans in the United States is something that no one wants to remember. Yet her novel forces its readers to recognize the existence and conditions of slavery in a nation that would prefer to forget that such a crime was ever committed. Morrison coins an uncommon word "rememory" in the novel, which is used by Sethe to express her feeling about the past: "Some things go. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory." (Note 7) It can be interpreted as the recurrence of the activities of the past. In the process of rememory each character begins to realize who is doing what. Stuart Hall states that identity is grounded in "retelling of the past". (Note 8)

But it no longer addresses us as a simple, factual, 'past'... It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth. (Note 9)

According to Hall, while the "past" is constructed, conventional history is deconstructed. While deconstructing this history, black people interrogate the disremembered past because the past endured by them is based on absence of self-determination. In *Beloved*, through remembering and interrogating the disremembered past, former slaves develop some fresh understandings of the long history of slavery's destruction. These understandings are essential for them to claim "ownership of that freed self". (Note 10) In their memories of the past, they have also developed their own discourse about what actually happened, which enables them to develop subjectivity.

In *Beloved*, the memories of the past as slaves are so miserable that no one wants to re-experience it. Even re-imagining it in the mind will cause pain. It is everything but the "good old days" other novels often depict to produce pleasure from recollection. Every protagonist, not just Sethe, prefers to forget it forever rather than to reveal it before others. They exist almost as dream walkers as they remain determined to keep the past concealed. Morrison demonstrates the process of discovering and facing the past and combining the past with the present. *Beloved* and Sethe are portrayed as embodiments of the past to rememorialise colonial past, which brings about the return of history.

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha writes about the importance of memory to identity, "Remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-remembering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present." (Note 11) Rememory, then, is vital for former slaves to claim "the self that is no self"—identity denied under the slavery system and yet to be claimed in the

post-slavery period. The memory of slavery is carried by all the characters in *Beloved* who have suffered under the system. Understandably, they prefer not to bear this memory due to the pain it involves. Instead, they would like to get away from the past. However, no sort of resolution occurs for any of the characters until each learns to accept and deal with the past which is very alive in the present. Only then can a hopeful future be found.

For Morrison, the concept of rememory has implications beyond the personal. Sethe articulates these implications in the following passage: “even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened.” (Note 12) The past, then, is not individually contained. Reading slavery explicitly as a colonial institution forces a certain kind of rememory: slavery is a historical reality for every U. S. citizen, not just for contemporary African Americans. Morrison’s historical revisioning, which calls for collective rememory, defines the U. S. as an oppressive colonialist nation, thus challenging official historical narratives of democratic benevolence. It also places the U. S. as a nation in parallel position to Sethe and slavery. Sethe and her relationship to slavery as a colonialist institution embody in microcosm a postcolonial facet of Morrison’s historical rememory. In this equation, Sethe represents national identity as defined by colonial constructs. Just as the colonialist nature of national history manifests itself through the institutionalization of slavery, Sethe’s act of infanticide manifests her internalization of the oppressive ideologies that justify her enslavement. As a result, her story is about learning how to resist effectively, how to develop an empowered rather than a destructive subjectivity. Just as she needs to confront unresolved issues in her past, the nation also must confront the colonialist past in order to change the neocolonialist present.

#### **4. The Regained Solidarity within the Black Community to Reconstruct Afro-American’s culture and their Subjectivity**

Toni Morrison always thinks highly of black traditional culture. But to the blacks who were transported to America, many of their traditions have been lost and are disappearing that can be ascribed to the impact and distortion of the dominating Western culture. In the recent years especially after the Black Power Movement, the American blacks have begun to realize the importance of their spiritual legacy from which they are more and more liable to affirm their selfhood. One of the similarities of all the works of Morrison is to call for all the Afro-Americans to return to their traditional culture, for this is the way that can prevent them from being completely bleached by the white flood and claim an identity. This theme clearly appears in *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*. In the story of *Beloved* we also find the traces of cultural return which help the blacks develop an empowered and agentive sense of self. For instance, Baby Suggs is a figure who is actively involved in the return of Afro-American culture among the black people and the strength of the community is a kind of representation of the return of the traditional value. After Halle buys his mother, Baby Suggs, her freedom, she travels to Cincinnati, where she becomes a source of emotional and spiritual inspiration for the city’s black residents. She becomes “an unchurched preacher, one who visits pulpits and opens her great heart to those who use it”. (Note 13) She starts a cultural practice that sets out to free the whole black community, flesh and soul. Followed by every black man, woman and child who could make it through, Baby Suggs takes her great heart to the Clearing, where she leads the community to laugh, dance, cry, and sing, which liberates as a result every part of their body despised under slavery. As Sethe would later notice, the singing in the Clearing breaks “the back of the words” and returns her to the pre-linguistic era when there were only sounds that would prove undecipherable to her. It is the same sounds that Paul D finds difficult to pin down in Sixo’s song. They point to African language and culture lost in the process of enslavement. They are both heart soothing and identity generating. And the scene of singing and dancing in the woods celebrates the spiritual values cherished in West African culture. Thus, Baby Suggs is viewed as a cultural mother bent on leading the freed back community of Bluestone Street to live a new cultural life based on their African cultural traditions. In spite of her failure to prevent the persecution inflicted on her granddaughter either by the covetous schoolteacher or by her helpless but love-driven daughter-in-law Sethe, Baby Suggs also re-enacts the image of African “Great Mother”. In *Beloved*, Baby Suggs is represented as a woman of extraordinary power capable of feeding the whole community by drawing solely on her own source. She is able to love and, in turn, commands the love of the whole community through her ritualistic preaching. For the black community in *Beloved*, Baby Suggs is a cultural ancestor that embodies the remnant values taken from West African culture.

For Morrison, the spirit of the black community exerts extreme influences on personal growth and the development of a complete self. In *Beloved*, Morrison intends to indicate the primary role played by the community in the development of a black, especially for the black women. To combat slavery and its aftermath, they must combine together to achieve their self-identity. A fully developed self-identity includes the awareness of one’s position in the community and how to get on with others.

Sethe’s community plays an important role in the process of the development of her subjectivity against colonial

lessons of disempowerment. Morrison explains:

Sethe had had twenty-eight days...of unslaved life.... Days of healing, ease and real-talk. Days of company: knowing the names of forty, fifty other Negroes, their views, habits; where they had been and what done; of feeling their fun and sorrow along with her own, which made it better....All taught her how it felt to wake up at dawn and decide what to do with the day....Bit by bit.... along with the others, she had claimed herself. Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another. (Note 14)

Sethe lives an “unslaved life” for only twenty-eight days, although she never returns to literal slavery. Consequently, Morrison defines an unslaved life as a life with the freedom to develop one’s subjectivity. This process is closely bound to participation with one’s community. Sethe frees herself, but she does not “claim ownership of that freed self” alone. Her people “teach” her how to be herself. The necessary reciprocity of communal living and the continuous learning experience of constant communication with others help Sethe learn to see herself as an empowered subject within supportive community rather than the inferior other within colonial ideology.

Morrison, however, does not portray a simplistic image of communal perfection. She writes instead about the warped codes of morality that eventually cause a collective desertion of Sethe when she most needs support. Because the generous invitation to a bountiful feast at Baby Suggs’ is taken as a sign of pride, the community hopes and waits for Sethe’s downfall. The community, therefore, begins to withdraw its empowering support the day after the party:

[N]obody ran on ahead.... [N]ot anybody ran down...to say some new whitefolks with the Look just rode in. The righteous Look every Negro learned to recognize.... Like a flag hoisted, this righteousness telegraphed and announced the faggot, the whip, the fist, the lie, long before it went public. Nobody warned them... some other thing—like...meanness—that let them stand aside, or not pay attention... (Note 15)

The people of the community tacitly withdraw their support by denying Sethe, without warning, access to a system of communication developed by and for the community. As Charles Scruggs points out “Somehow the members of the black community imagine that Baby Suggs has not suffered in slavery as they have suffered, and this ignorance of their mutual history makes mutual trust impossible”. (Note 16) Their mutual distrust negates the mutual support necessary for the development of individual and communal subjectivity.

Sethe’s act of infanticide confirms her alienation from the community and all the neighbors refuse to sympathize with her. When she is set free and comes back to 124, abandoned by the community, she lives isolated with her daughter. Sethe’s “solitary life” is static. There is no potential for personal growth. Sethe describes her life in those eighteen years as “unlivable”. Because of her decision to kill her child and thus protect her from the “unlivable” life of denied subjectivity in slavery, she herself returns to a life in which she is unable to continue learning to “claim her freed self.”

Beloved’s takeover of 124 secures its total isolation. Beloved’s claim on her is total. Sethe no longer goes to work; she attends to Beloved’s wishes. While 124 exhausts itself in total isolation, Paul D learns Sethe’s story through the newspaper article, Stamp Paid’s view, and his own knowledge of Sethe. It is through Paul D and through Stamp Paid’s visit that the black community first hears about Beloved’s existence. 124 and the community are still estranged, but the goings-on in the house are acknowledged. It is Denver who breaks up the estrangement. For her, 124 is the whole known world. Beloved’s increasing malevolence, however, forces Denver to overcome her fear of the world beyond 124 and seek help from the community. Denver’s adventures out of the yard re-link 124 to the black community. This in-integration happens through a series of events—Denver’s commitment to working for the Bodwins outside 124 and outside the black community, far into the world of “white people”, and the convergence of black women to exorcize the ghost.

Denver asks Ella for help, and as “a practical woman”, Ella “didn’t like the idea of past errors taking the possessions of the present.” The women of the community came together and “arrived at 124, the first thing they saw was...themselves.... [T]here they were, young and happy, playing in Baby Suggs’ yard, not feeling the envy that surfaced the next day.” (Note 16) In coming together to help one of their own, the women are able to envision the past in which they had experienced a “mutual trust” with the family of 124. Their common memory strengthens their communal determination and they begin to pray for Sethe.

[A]nd then Ella hollered. Instantly the kneelers and the standers joined her. They stopped praying and took a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like. (Note 17)

The women of the community use the “sound” to position themselves outside the dominant discourse, a discourse defined and imposed by white colonizers. They need to position themselves in order to reach Sethe. With thirty black women assembling to exorcize the ghost, *Beloved* disappears mysteriously and forever, which symbolizes the strength of the black community in releasing the ex-slaves out of the oppression of the past. And the strength of the community is a kind of representation of the return of the traditional value of Afro-American and their subjectivity.

## 5. Conclusion

Deconstructing master narratives of official history and master’s discourse is not an easy task. The process of deconstruction must be accompanied the reproduction of “The New History” of Afro-American which can break away from the fetters of American hegemonic discourse, thus revealing the pathetic history of American black, subverting the master discourse and breaking down the black’s marginalized identity, and finally reconstructing Afro-American’s culture and their subjectivity. For the characters in the novel, the transition from object to subject presents many obstacles, however, with the support and encouragement from black history and traditional culture, subjectivity becomes attainable. Moreover, we learn that Morrison’s motive is to reconstruct Afro-American slave history and culture from the slaves’ subjective outlook, and to speak for the black people whose stories are censored or silenced. In so doing, Morrison creates a sense of belonging in the present for the black: black history and culture are inextricably bound with black identity. Meanwhile, Morrison suggests that contemporary Americans must confront the history of slavery in order to address its legacy, which manifests itself in ongoing racial discriminations and discords. As a black woman she uses the power of her pen to depict the total black experience, in particular the vicissitudes of women’s lives. In her own words she wants to break the silence of the political arena and the literary canon from which black women has hitherto been excluded. In the novel Morrison consciously sets African Americans’s past and their present living situation into her work, for she intends to make use of her literary discourse to reproduce “The New History” that was once veiled by the American white’s mainstream society. In this way, she hopes to cure the psychological trauma of the black and call on her people to look for their lost culture root and reconstruct their ethnic consciousness. So Morrison not only bases her writing in the past and present but also looks to the future by delineating the American black’s history and culture following the trials of the protagonists, thus addressing the issue of how the destiny of the black race will have, and as a result creates a major legacy for the American black’s literature.

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## Notes

- Note 1. Jiang Xinxin. (2004). The Reconstruction of the Black People's Ethnic Conciousness—An Analysis of Toni Morrison's Fictional World. *Journal of Xiangtan College* (Vol. 1, 106).
- Note 2. Morrison, Toni. (2001). *Beloved*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, p.274
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- Note 9. Ibid., p.226.
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- Note 11. Homi K Bhabha. (1997). *Locations of Culture*. New York: Routledge, p. 63.
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- Note 13. Ibid., p. 87.
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- Note 16. Charles Scruggs. (1992). "The Invisible City in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *Arizona Quarterly*, 48, p. 103.
- Note 17. Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. (2001). Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, p. 259.

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