

Metaphorical Analysis of the Governing Images in *Beloved*

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Abstract

Toni Morrison is a great African-American writer who is deeply concerned with the experience and mental process of black people, especially black women under double discriminations. Her extraordinary writing skills and deep insights win great reputation for her and she contributes outstanding works to the literary world such as *The Bluest Eye*, *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*.

This paper aims to analyze the metaphors of the novel *Beloved* from the perspective of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) put forward by Lakoff & Johnson and Conceptual Blending Theory (CBT) by Fauconnier & Turner with the focus on the cognitive function of metaphors, thus offering an exploration of its deep themes and dense implications.

The article is composed of four parts. The first part gives a brief introduction to Toni Morrison and her novel *Beloved*. The second part introduces the theories of CMT and CBT. The third part decodes the governing images of the novel and analyzes the metaphorical interpretations. Closely interrelated with each other, these metaphors form a semantic network to reveal the “huge iceberg” behind it, thus providing a better understanding of the novel and a new perspective of the study of Toni Morrison.

Keywords: conceptual metaphor, conceptual blending, Toni Morrison, *Beloved*

1. Introduction

Toni Morrison is the first black woman winning Nobel Prize. She speaks for black people from a marginalized culture which has been neglected or misinterpreted for centuries and she also shoulders the responsibility of reclaiming their identities within the white-dominated social context. Her winning of Nobel Prize and Pulitzer Prize testifies her mastery of language and ushers in a new era for African-American writers. She is especially concerned with the living conditions and spiritual world of black women who suffer a lot from the double discriminations from the white and men. At the same time, she greatly advocates the unyielding struggle of them.

Beloved was published in 1987 at the peak of Toni Morrison's creative power and it is among the writer's best novels to reflect her extraordinary skills and writing intentions. In this novel, she depicts the various images of the black vividly. Therefore, a study of Toni Morrison and her *Beloved* will contribute significantly to the understanding of black people's history, culture, living conditions within the white-dominant social context as well as the psychological and physical influence left on them. Toni Morrison always pays great attention to the metaphorical language in her writing and one of the remarkable characteristics of the novel is its application of metaphors with deep meanings which contribute a lot to the understanding of the themes and artistic values of the novel.

2. Theoretical Preliminaries

2.1 Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT)

In 1980, the famous book of *Metaphors We Live By* co-authored by Lakoff & Johnson came into being, which brings the study of metaphor into a completely new field. They claim that “Metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action; our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 3) In this book, they challenge the traditional views in various aspects. Firstly, they claim that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life. Secondly, they explore the cognitive nature of metaphor. Thirdly, the connection and coherence of metaphors is

deeply studied. Lastly, the concepts of two domains are introduced. They define these metaphors as conceptual metaphorical concepts and illustrate with abundant examples such as “Time is money”, “Life is journey”, “Life is play”, “Argument is war”.

2.2 Conceptual Blending Theory (CBT)

Conceptual blending theory put forward by Fauconnier & Turner is considered as a refinement of conceptual metaphor theory. The core of the theory is “mental space”. “Mental spaces are small conceptual packets constructed as we think and talk, for purposes of local understanding and action. Mental spaces are very partial assemblies containing elements, and structured by frames and cognitive models. They are interconnected, and can be modified as thought and discourse unfold. Mental spaces can be used generally to model dynamical mappings in thought and language.” (Fauconnier & Turner, 1996, p. 113)

According to Fauconnier, “Conceptual blending is a general, basic mental operation with highly elaborate dynamic principles and governing constraints.” (Fauconnier, 2002, p. 18) A blend must be composed of following elements. There are at least two INPUT spaces with a partial cross-space mapping between them. The shared structure of two INPUT spaces is represented in GENERIC space in the network of conceptual integration and integrates into another space; the BLENDED space which inherits partial structure from the input spaces has its own emergent structure.

Compared with conceptual metaphor theory, conceptual blending theory focuses on the on-line construction of meaning. And its proposal that the construction of meanings lie mainly in the blending spaces is a landmark in the field of linguistic study. Conceptual blending theory is mainly employed to elaborate meaning construction and reasoning system of the “on-line metaphorical process”, therefore has the mighty explanatory power of metaphor to solve the mismatches that could not be explained by conceptual metaphor theory.

3. Metaphorical Analysis of the Governing Images

One of the salient features of Toni Morrison’s novels is the abundance of significant images and metaphors with deep meanings which have been placed much weight on and widely appreciated. The metaphors are drawn from nature and the life of the black people. This part aims to analyze the governing images such as the tree and the quilt to explore the metaphorical meanings and the psychological foundations of these metaphors.

3.1 Metaphorical Analysis of the Image of Tree

Deeply influenced by the African tradition and mythology and informed by the Bible, Toni Morrison attaches great importance to the natural scenery which is richly embedded with human lives and their emotions and the recurring image of tree can attest it. “Morrison creates tree images as varied and contradictory as her characters who identify with the natural world.” (Fulton, 2005, p. 192) There are diverse understandings toward the image of tree and even its individual parts. Tree plays a significant role in the novel to such a degree that it is closely connected with the black’s life—in the past, at present and in the future; in misery, in happiness and in hope. “Tree resemble people, people resemble trees, and the deepest desires and fears of Morrison’s characters become entangled with these metaphors.” (Fulton, 2005, p. 190) It takes different forms in the novel and this part contributes to the metaphorical meanings of its diverse forms. As an African American, Toni Morrison claims her identity and tries to preserve and spread the black’s heritage and culture and we need some background cultural knowledge to explain the metaphorical meanings of tree and the blend of the two input spaces. Trees, and particular sacred groves, play a crucial role in African religion, where they are considered as intermediaries between God and man. In the novel, Toni Morrison frequently uses the natural image of tree to unfold her writing purposes. According to the “source-target” mode in conceptual metaphor theory, the novel metaphorically project natural image of the “tree” onto human emotions and actions to achieve the combination or the blend of the human feelings, experiences and actions with the feelings of the natural creatures. In many parts of the novel, tree plays a role of a caring and comforting person. The relationship between tree and the characters are close and intimate. In the Sweet Home, there are an abundance of trees and the tree which offers a place for the slaves to have their midday meal is an important part in the slaves’ life. It is called “Brother” by the slaves—a warm and sweet name with moral significance. Whenever they recall the horrible life in Sweet Home, the only comforting image in the overwhelming torturing memories—the tree will come into their mind. The crown of the tree not only offers them refreshment and coolness in Sweet Home, but rather, like a hug of person, offers comfort and warmth to those who suffer from the turmoil of the hard work and sad emotions. Paul D usually sat under it and “might get up in the middle of the night, go all the way out there, start the earth-over by starlight.” And in his mind, “Trees were inviting; things you could trust and be near.” (*Beloved*, 21) The characters seek spiritual shelter and nurturing power from the tree to escape the overwhelming persecution of the white and the evil of the slavery. In some sense, the tree is more like a person rather than a plant and the human

emotions and finds its projections on the tree. Trees not only serve as redemption in the Sweet Home, but also in the later life of Paul D. When he escapes from the prison, he is extremely exhausted and confused about where to go, the tree plays an important role again as a lighting tower. "He raced from dogwood to blossoming peach. At last, he reached a field of apple trees whose flowers were just becoming tiny knots of fruit. From February to July he was on the lookout for blossoms." (*Beloved*, 112) Tree is identified with a mentor in this aspect who brings redemption and direction as well as hope of free life to Paul D. Denver's happiest and sweetest time also directly comes from the tree. "Back beyond 124 was a narrow field that stopped itself at a wood. On the yonder side of these woods, a stream. In these woods, five boxwood bushes, planted in a ring, had started stretching toward each other four feet off the ground to form a round, empty room seven feet high, its walls fifty inches of murmuring leaves." (*Beloved*, 28) In the description we can feel the warmth and security it provides to the little Denver. "murmuring" is the action of person and Denver could find her accompany in the tree room in the lonely world. Though the trees take a form of room to Denver, they can also be conceptualized as a hug of a person. From the above two examples, it is not difficult for us to realize that the emotions and behaviors of people can find their projections in the image of "tree" and respectively they serve as source domain and target domain in the conceptual metaphor. And it is safe to come to the conventional conceptual metaphor that is nature is animate or more exactly tree is animate or tree is a person. Trees are not only metaphorically interpreted as sacred person in the novel, but also the life of the black people. Tree is also pervasive in the experience of the character Beloved. She returns to 124 by "just shot up one day sitting on a stump." And reappears on a tree stump again "emerged from death, much like a new sprout would grow from its original source." (Weathers, 2005, p. 208) after leaning against a tree and going through the woods on Carnival day. As we know, Beloved is a ghost who comes back from the other world for revenge and getting back the mother's love by taking form of a lady, she is closely connected with the image of death which is stood by the stump and to some extent Beloved is "constantly associated with a felled tree" (Bonnet, 1997, p. 45). Here stump is not only a symbol of death, it connects the two world—the world of living and the world of death, also it serves as path between the past and the present of the black's life. Therefore, it is safe to say that stump here can be metaphorically interpreted as renewal and the tree is not a tree of death, but a tree of life. In spite of the sacred nature and active role of the trees, the evil part of the trees also catches our attention. The trees in the Sweet Home, though beautiful, just like the place they are situated, stand for the evil of slavery and always come into the black's mind whenever they recall the animal-like tortures in Sweet Home. Sixo, a slave with strong expectation of a better future, failed in an escape from the plantation. As a punishment, he is tied to a tree and burned to death by hickory fire. His happiness comes from the tree when he "keep his bloodiness open in the trees" and his tragic ending is also closely connected with the tree. The trees are also used as tools to punish other slaves. Slaves are hanged on the tree and "the trees provided limbs and switches for whipping and gallows for lynching." (Weathers, 2005, p. 209), the evil of the slave owners are imposed upon the tree and the dark side of the tree unfolds against the background that the world is full of hatred and disaster towards the black slaves. Sethe's experience can further attest the point when she is forced to rut with the depraved white engraver "beneath the tree" for ten minutes just for seven dear letters, "B-E-L-O-V-E-D"—the name of her daughter to be engraved on the tomb stone. The "crawling—already?" baby is killed by her own mother who wants to save her from the destiny as a slave. Just as Sethe says, she did all of this out of "thick love" of a mother. The inhuman controversy can only happen in an inhuman world where even the noblest motherhood is spoiled. This time, the shadow casted by the crown of the tree is not a pleasant shelter but metaphorically the horrible shadow of slavery which dehumanizes the female slave and deprives them of the motherhood.

Two input spaces are created and juxtaposed at the reading and interpretation of the novel, namely, tree and human being. The input space of tree which witnesses the up and down, the happiness and sorrow, the redemption and turmoil of the black's life is a combination of good and evil, a healing as well as a destructive power. Many animate words such as listen and murmur and the way of calling people such as "Brother" which are exclusive to the description of human beings are used metaphorically. Many feelings, emotions and actions evoked by people find their expressions in the tree. The generic space reflects event frames for the similarities between the two inputs—agent, living and possessing good and evil. The blend that the tree like a person accompanying the life of the black has an emergent structure—the close relationship between tree and human being. The two sides of human being—some part of it caring and kind and some part of it evil and vicious, which is in every way like the nature of the tree in the novel. The tree itself is a combination of good nature and evil nature. The crown of the tree offers safety as well as casting shadow in which Sethe suffers the shame of trading 7-letter engraved on the tomb stone of Beloved with the white engraver. The branches and leaves stretch to form a tree room for Denver as well as serving as tools to whip the black slaves. The tree gives directions for Paul D to escape as well as the pillar where Sixo is tied to burn to death. Actually, the metaphor of the tree employed in

the novel implies the nature of the world that on the one hand, it is helpless and disappointing bringing harm and hurt to the human being, on the other hand, it is healing and hopeful.

3.2 Metaphorical Analysis of the Image of Quilt

The image of quilt is an integral part in the African-American literature, especially the feminist literature. It not only tells the life experience of the black people, but also demonstrates their history, the tradition and the culture. They never hesitate to voice their love and cherish towards the quilt. "My whole life is in the quilt./ All my joys, and all my sorrows/ stitched into those little pieces./.../ I tremble sometimes/ When I remember/ what that quilt know." (Joyce, 1991, p. 13). The quilt is always patched with scraps of cloth from their clothes or other daily used cloth. Each quilt can tell a story of a family and evokes the memory of the past. Many black writers play the image of quilt in the novels to full, such as Alice Walker in her *The Color of Purple*. Understanding the metaphor of quilt will shed light on the understanding of black people's life and values. With no exception, quilt also makes its recurring appearance in the novel and provides opportunities to understand the characters, plots and the themes of the novel.

At the beginning of the novel, when Baby Suggs is dying, she is covered under a quilt with two patches of bright colors against the drab surroundings. "The walls of the room were slated-colored, the floor earth-brown, the wooden dresser the color of itself, curtains white, and the dominating feature, the quilt over an iron cot, was made up of scraps of blue serge, brown and gray wool—the full range of the dark and the muted that thrift and modesty allowed." (*Beloved*, 38) As the spiritual center of the black community, Baby Suggs is the source of power and the embodiment of black tradition. This unique plot with the quilt therefore is endowed with significant meanings. The main body of the quilt is always of dark colors, like the gloomy history of the black. The quilt passed on from generation to generation could be a present to brides, a covering of a new-born baby or a heritage of the passed. It accompanies the black overcoming the hardships of slavery and recovering from the traumas. Each generation will inevitably add some patches to it which are not only scraps of everyday use, but also the records of the past humiliating and painful memories and the history of a family. As Gutcheon puts it: "They could tell a tale of days and months of mindless, thankless tedium, cooking food and a depressing sameness, washing and sewing and mending clothes that were forever being worn out or outgrown, frustrating days and sleepless nights with a whining child ill or dying of some disease that could have been cured by one shot of penicillin." The quilt's backing fixes all the patches together as a whole and connects all the memories together. At the end of the novel, when Paul D finds that Sethe "lying under a quilt of merry colors" (*Beloved*, 271), his past experience comes to his mind and he wants to share it with Sethe. It is just like a telepathy when Denver strikes the quilt softly, she foretold the incoming future to her family. Denver, who is brought up on the other side of the river, is the incarnate of black's future. Her touching of the quilt implies new events and new people will come to the quilt and a new history of the black will begin. When Sethe misses Baby Suggs and comes to the room, her eyes unconsciously lies on the quilt with "two orange squares". Baby Suggs hungers for and ponders bright colors all her life even at the last minute. Bright colors are always identified with life and vigour, at the same time, it signifies the bright hope and future. Even though the orange on the quilt is "faded", the black people's pursuit of their selfhood will never perish and their dream of a free and happy life will never fade. At last, as Janice Barnes Daniel puts it: "Like the patched covering, both Sethe and Paul D will become mended—fragmented remnants being pieced together, or held together, into whole selves." Blending means extracting the partial structures of the two inputs to form the emergent structure of the third space. (Wang, 2001, p. 37) The quilt and the history of black people serve as two inputs. The quilt is passed on from generation to generation to mark the footprints of the people, no matter it is under slavery or in freedom. It is in every way similar to the history which is created by every generation. The quilt is patched with memories of the history and holds the hope for the future. While the history is "patched" with pains, the bright color implies the sunshine after the dark days. Even though oppressed by the white-dominated system, the black never give up the desire for a better life which is fully expressed in the bright "orange patches". Everybody's life is composed of pleasure and misery, past and future, pains and dreams. The quilt bears the characteristics of the black's life and it can serve as a proof that the black people hold on their unyielding spirit and achieve their rebirth.

4. Conclusion

The novel is alive with metaphors that are closely and systematically related to form a harmonious semantic network and the connections and coherence provide us an opportunity to probe into the significant themes of it.

Analyzing from the perspective of CMT and CBT, there are similarities between the nature and human emotions and human emotions can find its projection in the nature. The images of trees and quilt are common in nature, while in the novel they are far from being simply emotionless objects. "Like an iceberg, the words on the surface

are just a corner of the whole iceberg below and the related semantic network is hidden.” (Shu, 2000, p. 42) They are metaphorically interpreted as persons in the novel and play different roles in the black’s life. Each human being is a combination of kindness and evil and this nature could find its expression in the image of tree. Trees play a two-sided role. On one hand, it acts as a caring person to offer comfort and guidance to the suffering blacks such as Paul, Sixo and Baby Suggs. On the other hand, it serves as a tool of the white to oppress the slaves and the evil part of tree is expressed. Quilts are also animate in *Beloved*. They are endowed with life and serve as storytellers. Quilt is passed on from generation to generation with the experience and emotions of each generation added to it. Each patch of it is a story and a memory; they are tight bonds between the family members even the whole black people and also the vivid expression of their life and states of mind. The fragmented structure of the novel is tied up closely by these metaphors and these metaphors are around the theme of the novel.

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