



On Sethe's Trauma and Recovery in *Beloved* from the Perspective of Trauma Theory

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Abstract— This article is devoted to the study of trauma portrayed in the novel *Beloved* by Toni Morrison. The subject of the study is Sethe, the protagonists in the novel, who not only suffers from physical pain but also has to bear great mental pressure. The aim of the research is to find out the root causes and the recovery process of Sethe's trauma, and then explore Toni Morrison's writing ideas and the black spirit in her works. The major research methods are text analysis and social and historical criticism. How to heal the historical trauma that has been deposited in the hearts of the black people for such a long time and get rid of the misunderstanding of themselves? This is not only the question that the author has pondered over for a long time, but also a thought-provoking question to all the readers.

Keywords— *Beloved*, inter-generational transmission, recovery, Toni Morrison, Trauma Theory

I. INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison, born on February 18th, 1931 in Ohio, was the first African American and the eighth woman cited for the Nobel Prize for Literature. In 1969, Morrison's maiden work *The Bluest Eye* was published. Since then, she has produced a total of 11 novels, all of which are based on the life of the black people in the US with exquisite strokes, vivid characters and plots, and rich imagination. For African American slaves, staying away from home and maintaining family ties is the result of their wisdom and tenacity and also their emotional and spiritual sustenance. Therefore, the loss of such precious wealth due to the resistance to fate has become Morrison's helpless sigh for the fate of blacks.

Beloved, which was published in 1987, is an extreme case of the black's resistance against fate. Sethe, one of the protagonists in the novel, felt helpless after experiencing fight and resistance and decided not to let her daughter live how she had lived, so she cut the baby's throat with her own hands. The plot that real freedom could only be attained through death derived from historical facts. Morrison fixed this moment of heart-breaking despair in the history of world literature through fantastic techniques.

The present paper mainly explores the causes of trauma from the perspective of collective trauma theory and delves into the healing of historical trauma among black people.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The novel of *Beloved* has long been a study subject of literary critics and researchers in Western literary circles, whose focuses are its themes, writing skills and related theories like feminism, psychoanalysis and trauma.

Slavery is one of the most prominent themes in the novel. Krumholz^[1] emphasizes the impact of slavery on black people and maintains that the tragedies experienced by Sethe are brought about by the cruel slavery. Mercy^[2] also examines the effect of slavery on black slaves, but the focus is shifted to the influence on their spiritual life.

The construction of identity is another research focus by scholars. Holden-Kirwan^[3] probes into the identity construction of the protagonists in this novel in the light of Lacanian theory. In his view, the consciousness of identity construction has a close bearing on the traumatized past. And he discusses the identity of the characters in *Beloved*

from the perspective of violence. Farhan^[4] explores the process of how African-American women's identities are built in the novel. The author highlights the value of personal and group memories and holds that only by connecting with others in a new approach can they gain a sense of self-worth. Soraya^[5] explores the impact of slavery on females in the novel mainly by analyzing how slavery makes women have the belief that their identity is lost. Therefore, the new identity must be reconstructed. Khalegi^[6] focuses on the African-American community, in which people heal themselves by sharing their miseries.

Some scholars pay close attention to the creative narrative techniques of *Beloved*. According to Schreiber^[7], Morrison uses flashback, memory and nightmares to narrate the story in an innovative way. Singh^[8] holds that Morrison utilizes the narrative techniques subtly and skillfully to deal with slavery. It is believed that Morrison's combination of historical consciousness with the suffering of black slaves endows the narrative techniques of *Beloved* with new significance.

Chinese scholars also show great interest in *Beloved*. Such themes as trauma, maternal love, slave identity construction and others have appeared in all kinds of publications. Characters, symbolic meanings and writing skills are also popular study objects among researchers.

A great number of researchers focus on the theme of trauma and identity construction. A study by Huang and Tao^[9] demonstrates that this novel sets the cruel past in the present "re-memory", and thus it is beyond the limits of time, history, and consciousness. Another study by Zeng and Jiang^[10] pays close attention to interpret the way the ghost gives rise to the reappearance of trauma. Meanwhile, they also dig into the image of the ghost in accordance with the novel's unique narration and from cognitive aspects.

Identity construction is another theme of importance in Morrison's novels. Zhang^[11] thinks that the publication of *Beloved* is conducive to the identity construction of black people. Wang^[12] studies *Beloved* from the perspective of Lefebvre's space theory. He links race and space, showing how the black community is constructed in the light of space theory. In his opinion, *Beloved* is the story of space practice in which the blacks evolves from egoism to mutual assistance and from separation to solidarity.

Weng^[13] maintains that the ghost *Beloved* derived from Morrison's fertile imagination. Liu^[14] discusses the inner relationships of the novel from the perspective of Genet's theories of narrative time, narrative focus and variable narrative discourses. In other words, Liu analyzes the narrative strategy of the novel in accordance with Genet's narrative theory, and finally reveals the novel's special narrative skills and eternal themes.

III. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: TRAUMA THEORY

The word "trauma" originally refers to "wounds", the injury of body resulting from physical, chemical, and biological factors. Later, it extends to the psychological field, bearing the meaning that psychological damage caused by external stimuli, which often has profound influence on the victims' life after the unpleasant experience. Psychiatrists, like Sigmund Freud and Judith Herman, tend to study trauma from the perspective of psychology. Freud defines the traumatic experience in his work *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* as "the one which, in a very short space of time, is able to increase the strength of a given stimulus so enormously that its assimilation, or rather its elaboration, can no longer be effected by normal means"^[15, p.263]. Obviously, according to Freud, traumatic experience means the experience that can greatly increase the intensity of a certain stimulus in a very short period of time, so that the process of assimilation can no longer work in a normal way.

After the outbreak of the First World War, the trauma theory was extended to post-traumatic stress disorder. Due to the fact that many soldiers participating in the war had various mental symptoms, a large quantity of psychologists began to intervene in the symptoms of soldiers instead of employed psychiatry. However, Abram Kardiner, an American psychoanalyst published an article entitled "The Trauma Neuroses of War", claiming that there was a link between trauma and such symptoms as hysteria, malingering and epilepsy at the beginning of the Second World War^[16]. A long-term study was since conducted by psychoanalysts on Nazi concentration camps and survivors of the Holocaust after World War II. After the Vietnam War, experts began to pay more attention to the symptoms of "shell shock" or "combat fatigue" that veterans reported when they returned home. With the rapid development of women's liberation campaigns and anti-child abuse campaigns in the United States, the field of trauma research has expanded to women, children, and marginalized groups. In 1980, the American Psychiatric Association officially recognized post-traumatic stress disorder as an independent diagnostic unit.

Trauma theory was first applied in literature by American scholar Cathy Caruth in the 1990s. According to Cathy Caruth, the response to trauma is often uncontrolled and delayed, occurring in repetitive ways in the victim's mind, such as flashbacks, and other recurring phenomena^[17]. Thereafter, trauma theory was applied by a host of theorists into numerous fields such as literature, history, anthropology and sociology. With the development of trauma theory, scholars not only pay

attention to the research of individual trauma in physiology and psychology, but also extend the scope to the collective level. Arthur Neal pointed out that “the concept of trauma applies equally to the collective experience of the whole group” [18, p.4]. That is to say, when traumatic events shake the foundations of society, they have a collective effect. According to Eyerman [19], collective trauma does not necessarily have to be felt or experienced by any, because members of a social group carry the same historical memory of their own nation, and they will maintain the collective memory together. Hence, the transitivity of trauma is one of its most prominent features. From generation to generation, traumatic memories can be passed down, even if the group member has not personally undergone these traumatic events. Therefore, it is not difficult to understand that individual trauma and collective trauma are interdependent and indivisible, and individual trauma is the epitome of collective trauma.

IV. THE NARRATIVE OF TRAUMA IN BELOVED

In *Beloved*, the protagonist Sethe not only suffers from physical pain such as beatings and imprisonment, but she also has to bear great mental torment. Sethe's trauma has gone through three stages: deliberate avoidance of recollecting trauma, disclosing trauma and rebirth after nightmare.

Escaping from Trauma

After being traumatized, Sethe develops the typical symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, which means she is not willing to recall the past. On the one hand, Sethe is separated from her traumatic experience. More precisely, the miserable past has been externalized and rejected from her memory. Thus, for Sethe, it is merely an object, which does not seem to belong to her. On the other hand, she evades her traumatic recollection inside her body and refuses to talk with others. Sethe often stops her narrative with silence, especially in her interaction with Denver. These things are unspeakable for Sethe, not only because she is reluctant to say, but she is unable to say. The past was so painful that Sethe is not willing to think or talk about it. Also, she deliberately prevents her daughter Denver from knowing the cruelty of slavery, so that her daughter will be not be affected by it. However, the young Denver does not understand that. She frequently asks her mother about the past out of curiosity, but the answers are often unsatisfactory. Sethe often stops in the middle of her sentence. “The single slow blink of her eyes; the bottom lip sliding up slowly to cover the top; and then a nostril sigh, like the snuff of a candle flame--signs that Sethe had reached the point beyond which she would not go.” [20, p.13] Sethe does not know how to narrate the past events without harming the

young daughter Denver. Besides, can words convey the bitter experience of slave life?

Reappearance of Trauma

Even after the abolition of slavery, the trauma inflicted on the blacks has not gone away. Unhealed trauma is repeated in various ways, disrupting the normal life of the survivors of slavery. The reappearance of trauma is mainly embodied in *Beloved*'s disclosure of historical trauma and Sethe's repeated abnormal behaviors.

Toni Morrison says that the reason for letting the ghost *Beloved* appear is simple, that is, to make history real and traumatic memories real. [21, p.5] *Beloved*'s particularity in identity makes her a witness to both the collective trauma of the slaves and the individual trauma of Sethe. It can be proved in Morrison's words that for one thing, *Beloved* is the resurgence of Sethe's dead daughter; for another, she is a survivor in the inhumane slave trade because she speaks a traumatic language when she answers and asks questions. [22, p. 241]

Beloved is the baby killed by her mother, who returns in the flesh to take revenge on Sethe and seek missing maternal love, which represents the individual trauma. And through the stream of consciousness, *Beloved* recounts the tragic experience of black slaves in the cabin when they were shipped to America, as if she were on the ship for sale. *Beloved* exposes the unhealed trauma which constantly haunts the living and reminds them of the wounds they have suffered. She has a greedy desire for storytelling from Sethe, attempting to retrieve the memories. When facing Baby Suggs, Denver, and even Paul D, Sethe cannot overcome the hurt to tell the old story. During the conversation with Sethe, *Beloved* evokes Sethe's memory with various questions, “Your woman she never fix up your hair?” “Tell me about your earrings” The questions force her to recall the pains and tell stories about the past: her husband Halle fell apart when he saw her being abused by the new white masters; her mother never fed her and was forced to work until she was hanged; she tried to kill all her children to save them from slavery; she saw bodies hanging in trees on her way to escape... *Beloved*'s desire for storytelling prompts Sethe to recall, cutting open every unhealed wound.

For Sethe, the past and the present are intertwined. Therefore, she cannot tell the traumatic memories from reality. The anguished experience occupies the highest position in Sethe's spiritual world, causing tremendous chaos in her memory. As a result, she becomes a verbose speaker. Her repeated words are the exterior representation of the traumatic experience, and her repeated flashbacks are symptoms of trauma, which constantly force Sethe to experience it again.

Sethe's repetition in narrative and flashbacks is the unconscious behavior. Each day when Sethe gets up, the

most crucial thing is to drive the past away. But however hard she tries, she is still attacked by the traumatic memory and undergoes the endless repetition of it. Wounds are not healed by repetition, but on the contrary, they are strengthened.

The repetitive narrative and flashbacks are a kind of unconscious behaviors that are out of the control of rational thinking. They are isolated from Sethe's subject consciousness and manifest themselves in the way of repetition, attempting to make the survivors experience the trauma again. This kind of experience nearly numbs Sethe, so that what she says or thinks, to some extent, has nothing to do with her rational self. To put it another way, her traumatic experience is disconnected from her body. The Sethe in the story is the experiencer, but the Sethe who tells the story is the survivor. The experiencer and survivor appear to be two different selves. The trauma, like a sharp knife, makes an incision in Sethe's mind, splitting the original whole self into two selves, the self experiencing the trauma and the self surviving after the trauma. Considering the repeated experience of trauma, it is understandable that the symptoms of the trauma become increasingly apparent and more serious. Memories of the past launch innumerable attacks, therefore the trauma put its slaves in a morbid state.

V. THE ROOT CAUSES OF TRAUMA IN BELOVED

Analyzing the reasons for trauma is conducive to looking for the ways to heal the trauma. First and foremost, the years of enslavement is the origin of trauma. Because of it, the personal freedom of the black is limited and the rights to become mothers and fathers are deprived of without mercy. Therefore, the unspeakable trauma gains its life. Secondly, according to the trauma theory mentioned before, even if someone in the community does not have the personal experience of the slavery, he or she can still be affected by the collective trauma. How does it happen? The transitivity of trauma plays an indispensable role.

Trauma from Slavery

In American history, the inhuman slavery system has caused great physical and psychological damage to black slaves. In the plantations, the slaveholders own everything regarding to the slaves and have full control over the slaves' lives. They treat slaves as animals and transfer or execute slaves randomly. The slaves are used as working machines, and for female slaves, they are also regarded as breeding machines which produce more labor. No matter who the father is, the slaveholders can arbitrarily dispose of the children. Their fates are predictable: being sold or staying at the same plantation as slaves. Under this system, black parents have to endure the pain of being separated from their

children when they can only watch them being taken away by slaveholders.

Under the oppression of slavery, it is almost impossible for the blacks to maintain a stable family relationship. Each individual is just like a ghost bound in the land of North America without a sense of belonging. Morrison once said, "The most important of all is the separation of family members."^[23, p.31] Sethe is an ordinary black slave, and her act of trying to kill her children is a brave resistance against slavery. She is not willing to hand over her child to the slave owner for the so-called "family integrity", as she insists that it's one thing to free yourself, but it's another to have your own free self. Physical scars and pain may be healed with the time going by, but the mental trauma is not easy to be driven away. Under the system of slavery, the blacks share the same fate, suffering tremendous physical and psychological trauma.

Trauma from Transmission

The transitivity of trauma is one of the causes for the appearance of collective trauma. Trauma can be transmitted, connecting the past to the present, and from here to there, with the help of the medium of memory. In the novel, the trauma is firstly transmitted from Sethe's mother to Sethe mainly because of the lack of maternal love. The lack of milk plays an important role in Sethe's resentment towards her mother. Sethe's mother had been trapped in the fields for too long to care for Sethe and feed her. Only one female worker named "Nan" leaves a little of her own milk for Sethe after feeding the white babies. Sethe had little memory of her mother and the maternal love was apparently in absence. Not having milk of her own became the biggest pain that Sethe could remember. Providing milk to her children is not only a mother's responsibility, but also an embodiment of motherly love. So when she has children, she makes up her mind to maintain the milk in a bid to let her children enjoy the maternal love they deserve. Nevertheless, such a simple hope is dashed ruthlessly. Sethe's milk was stolen by the "school teacher" in Sweet Home. The lack of milk gives Sethe a wound that does not fade with time. The milk event brings back Sethe's repressed traumatic memories, expanding the pain of lack of milk and maternal love in her childhood. The milk is merely an image, but the lack of maternal love in childhood, which is closely related to it, is the inevitable pain in Sethe's heart. Sethe believes that the loss of maternal love cannot be allowed to continue in the next generation. She wants to make up for the vacancy in her heart, so she overcomes all kinds of difficulties and determines to nurse her children, which is not only to satisfy her own desire for maternal love, but also to remedy the psychological trauma caused by her mother.

Secondly, trauma is spread from Sethe to her children.

Slavery takes a toll on the black people even after it is abolished. The trauma is spread in the black families through intergenerational transmission. Together they all become the bearers of the trauma. Owing to the influence of trauma, Sethe's love to her daughter Beloved is distorted in Beloved's mind. Sethe tries her best to be a good mother, giving her children a strong motherly love, no matter how hard she is working on the plantation. When Sethe flees, unlike her mother, she takes all the children with her. Nonetheless, in Beloved's testimony, such a conscientious mother is considered indifferent and heartless. Her resentment toward Sethe is like Sethe's towards her mother. The memory of Sethe and Beloved about the same event is diametrically opposite. Sethe took Beloved's life by cutting her throat with a saw to protect her from slavery. This behavior stems from Sethe's mother's belief that she will choose death unhesitatingly if she has to remain a slave. But Sethe's efforts are not appreciated. Eighteen years later, Beloved returns to her family in flesh, blaming Sethe for the harm she has done to her and decides that Sethe is an unfit mother. The tragedies play out in three generations. Sethe's mother abandons Sethe, and years later Sethe kills her daughter Beloved. Sethe cannot understand what her mother has done: not feeding her, or even running away without her. Similarly, Beloved cannot understand what Sethe has done, namely killing her. In essence, both acts are mothers abandoning their children. And Sethe becomes the intermediary for spreading trauma,

Confronted with slavery, maternal love appears to be so powerless. Slavery deprives mothers of their ability to love and children of their right to be loved. Thus, the children bear grudges against their mothers. Slave mothers protect their children in extreme ways, only to receive the child's denial of their maternal love. Slavery caused the traumatic story between mother and children to repeat, and thus the trans-generational phantom comes into being. Through slavery in the south, Morrison shows the inhumane suppression of maternal love. She produces a historical dialogue in time and space with the two traumatic events. Hence, through individual trauma the collective trauma is reflected.

VI. THE HEALING OF TRAUMA IN BELOVED

From the above analysis we can see that the individual trauma and collective trauma have a deep impact on the characters' understanding and construction of themselves. In order to gain spiritual freedom and independence, they struggle to get rid of their traumas in the way of telling their trauma, group acceptance and self-subjectivity construction.

The Telling of Trauma

Telling stories serves as a process of externalizing the

trauma hiding behind them. Only when one can clearly convey the event can he narrate the event in his language. And through sharing it with others, trauma can be healed.

The telling of trauma is an indispensable means in trauma recovery. Caruth believes that the cognition of trauma is staged, with each stage conducive to the recovery of trauma. The telling of trauma belongs to one of the stages. On the one hand, the characters endeavor to speak of trauma to alleviate the pain; on the other hand, they strive to overcome the pain resulting from repeated trauma. There is also a controversy in mental state, that while the victim does his utmost to avoid the traumatic memory, it still invades the victim in the forms of nightmares, flashbacks, etc., making it impossible for them to escape from the trauma. Therefore, the victim needs to use language as a carrier to express the memory, so as to heal from the trauma.

The painful memory of killing her daughter has been haunting Sethe all the time to an intolerable degree. She evades the traumatic events in the past all the time, feeling that "every mention of her past life hurt" [20, p.71]. She thinks telling trauma means experiencing traumatic events once again, so she maintains silent, out of instinct. Choosing the right person to speak to and speak to him in the right time will reduce the hurt, on the ground that only when the victim realizes that someone is actually listening will he share his inner pain. In the novel, the right person for Sethe is Paul D. After he arrives at 124, Sethe realizes that talking to him about the unbearable past could relieve the pain because they share the similar pain and are old friends. With his company, Sethe finally can cry, which helps release the stress. The experience of her milk being stolen by the white is the most shameful traumatic event she has ever suffered in Sweet Home, and she never had the courage to mention it to anyone. When she speaks it to Paul D, she recounts what happened intermittently. Through the telling of the past, her psychological burdens are alleviated. After that, she finds herself even more comfortable than evading the old memory. Listeners help the victims to transform the traumatic memories into narrative memories, which helps alleviate the hurt.

In the telling process, with the memory brought back, self-identity of the black slaves can be constructed. In the novel, the subjectivity construction of the blacks also has a direct causal relationship with the trauma they have experienced before. Their previous traumatic memories are not only the power of, but also the key to the construction. To recover from the pain, Sethe "must come to accept her memories, when each begins to remember and acknowledge their alter selves as part of their core self, they reintegrate."^[24, p.174] Therefore, the recovery process also includes recollection. By sharing her old stories with Beloved, Sethe's courage is built up. She thinks of the brave

man who helped her escape from Sweet Home. She thinks of Amy's helping hands on the road when she fled with her baby, instead of the painful experience that she gave birth to Denver on a broken boat. Recalling positive experiences activates Sethe's ability to love. Therefore, in a bid to get rid of trauma, Sethe needs to continue to tell the experiences that hurt her mercilessly so as to construct self-identity.

Group Acceptance

The shortcomings of the black community are partly to blame for black people's tragic fate: white slave-owners come to Sethe's house to catch her, but no one comes to inform her. Baby Suggs always believes that the suffering blacks are a family and the members have the duty to assist each other. But in this critical moment, she encounters everyone's indifference. Baby Suggs is so puzzled and depressed until her death. It can be seen that the black community is far from a perfect place to live in. However, in Morrison's opinion, the community is still irreplaceable. Ella, the leader of the community, holds the belief that whoever is wrong in the past can be better at the present, so she leads the community to aid Sethe when she tries to injure Baldwin. When the neighbors pull together to help her, Sethe regains the strength. In contrast with the indifference of the neighbors when Sethe killed her daughter years ago, this time everyone chooses to rally around her to prevent the tragedy. The striking contrast between the two reactions shows the transformation of the community's relationship with Sethe and proves Morrison's affirmation of the black community. The ghost that has haunted Sethe for many years at last disappears, and the new community guides Sethe in a new direction. When Sethe cannot adapt to reality and live a normal life, it is the group that makes it possible for Sethe to unload the burden of historical trauma and regain her sanity.

In reality, when we consider the relationship between groups and individuals in the light of the current living conditions of African Americans, we have to pay close attention to the relationship between the two different racial groups. Whether or not the African American immigrants can integrate into the American society has become the key to the survival of them. In the novel, Morrison describes the relationship between the two groups, with her own reflection on this issue. It is on this basis that we can say that Morrison, standing in the modern society, looks back to the past and wrote about the events between the races that took place more than a hundred years ago. Her act itself has unique social significance. While describing the violence against the black slaves by the white masters, Morrison also shows that the two races can establish a harmonious relationship. Sethe escapes from the Sweet Home when she is pregnant. On the road, she was saved from danger by Amy, a white girl, and returns home after giving birth to Denver.

Among all the stories told by Sethe, Denver loves this one the most, which conveys warmth and also Morrison's hopes for the improvement in the relationship between whites and blacks.

VII. CONCLUSION

Beloved is a novel of narration, which reflects trauma of the black slaves and their offspring and reveals ways of healing it. The present paper, from the perspective of the trauma theory, has examined the narrative, the causes and the healing approaches to the historical trauma in the novel *Beloved*. After the meticulous analysis of the trauma, the paper appeals to people, especially those whose ancestors have unfortunately undergone the humanitarian disasters, to pay close attention to social integration.

As one of the African Americans, Toni Morrison speaks up for the blacks in her writings. Confronted with the suffering history of her race, Morrison ponders about how to heal the wounds. The exploration itself is of significance to other groups, nations and even the whole human race. In *Beloved*, Morrison puts forward the healing approaches of trauma, including the telling of trauma to build self-identity and group acceptance to relieve the traumatic pain. More or less, these approaches are of use for resolving similar problems, such as the psychological trauma arising from World War I, World War II and the Nanjing Massacre. When faced with traumatic past, should people remember or forget it? If remember, how do people handle the relationship between the past trauma and the new reality? If the trauma is forgotten, then who are forgetting? These questions remain for the entire mankind.

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