

Let the Voice Be Heard: a Study on Subjectivity of Black People via Dialogue in Toni Morrison's Novel *Beloved*

Haiyan Wang¹ Yu Cheng² Huaifang Jin³

^{1,2,3} School of Foreign Languages, Northwest University, Xi'an, Shaanxi, China

¹Corresponding author. Email: 20133911@nwu.edu.cn

ABSTRACT

As one of the most influential novelists in contemporary American literature, Toni Morrison was awarded Nobel Prize in literature in 1993 for her "description in novels characterized by visionary forces and poetic impact" which "gives life to an essential aspect of American reality". *Beloved* was her fifth novel in 1987, which astonished the literature field the minute it was published. Due to its controversy in theme, quite a few literature critics were attracted and had studied via different perspectives, like feminism, cultural factors, post-colonial or trauma, etc., however, not much research has been accomplished to highlight polyphonic style and subjectivity that are reflected again and again in their seemingly endless dialogues between Sethe, Denver and Baby Suggs throughout the entire novel. Applying dialogue from Bakhtin's polyphony theory, the present paper examines exquisitely how dialogue works to demonstrate subjectivity in all of them; and then how truth is decoded for the former black slaves. The findings show that, after numerous dialogues between Sethe, Denver, Beloved, Baby Suggs, and even Paul D, their subjectivity has become clearer, their inner torture is shown, their voice is heard, and eventually Sethe's life is restored to be normal. The study calls for greater attention to the embodiment of polyphonic style and dialogues in *Beloved*, which help to reveal the cruelty of slavery, at the same time, advocating the necessity to construct equality via dialogues among any individuals and collectiveness for the sake of a better world.

Keywords: Toni Morrison's "*Beloved*", Dialogue, Subjectivity, Voice, Equality.

1. INTRODUCTION

Beloved was the most well-known novel written by Toni Morrison, a well-known American black female writer. Since it was published, due to its controversy in theme, this novel has intrigued interests among numerous scholars, critics, both in America and overseas ever since. It has been examined from various perspectives and has shown unique complexity and abundance with splendid facets within literature world.

Among all pieces of papers on *Beloved* domestically and abroad, generally speaking, seven major perspectives have been discussed, i.e. (1) gender study; (2) subjectivity[3] [5]; (3) psycho-analysis; (4) identity recognition; (5) magic realism; (6) eco-criticism; (7) traumatic memory study. In essence, almost all the existing literature on

Beloved view it as a traditional novel, with the author as the only narrator from a God view perspective, and indeed no research has been conducted to analyse it as a polyphonic novel. This polyphonic angle particularly outweighs traditional perspectives in interpretation of the novel, since it emphasizes complex and unspoken bitterness, torture, loss of speech of the black, revealing a cruel and evil truth of slavery. The ghost haunting in the home is not literally a ghost story, it's more about how the real ghost "slavery" still haunt and torture the black even after it was demolished century ago.

Thus, to fill this gap, the present paper intends to investigate how dialogue works to awaken subjectivity in Sethe, Baby Suggs and Denver. Because of dialogues among these people, they realise some patches of hidden part of slavery that

they could never perceive when they fled away as slaves. Meantime, based on dialogues again and again in the novel, everything became clearer to them: they figured out it was not their fault to be a black, to be bruised, tortured, raped, treated like animals, etc. The blame should be on the evil slavery. And that is the only truth to be figured out.

The paper thus is divided into three parts: The first part refers to introduction; part two is the main body, it deals with three branches: dialogue theory, *Beloved* and embodiment of subjectivity; finally, conclusion is made at the end.

2. BAKHTINIAN DIALOGUE

2.1 Background of Bakhtin

Bakhtin lived in an age that was quite severe and strict. People were deprived of their rights of speech due to the dictatorship. As a scholar who knew the severe situation, and its prevailing hardness in the air, he had made great efforts to confront. In other words, he developed his own poetics, theories to inspire people to see essence of things. He saw thirst of the souls and their need to be awakened and to shout.

Among all his critics and poetics, *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics* is the most essential work, which embodied his splendid and courageous insights into novels, aesthetics, history and so on. In this masterpiece, he put forward polyphony theory, carnival spirit, etc. All of which concerns inner needs and equality of people. It's like he knows exquisitely the depth of every single soul.

Accordingly, in this study, Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* will be studied via Bakhtin's dialogue to demonstrate the cruelty of slavery, its destructive effect on the black, and the haunting power on blacks even if it's demolished century ago; at the same time, to reveal subjectivity of the black people and how it works in them to fight, subvert and grow.

2.2 Polyphony Theory

In this part, Bakhtin's polyphony theory is to be interpreted from its historical background and how it came into being. In addition, the basic angles of polyphony are explained specifically, i.e. subjectivity, dialogue and unfinalizability.

Bakhtin's polyphony theory was proposed at the end of 19th century and beginning of 20th century. At that time, there were wars and technology

developed, thus, human beings seemed insignificant to some extent. As a critic and literary theorist who had keen insight, Bakhtin was not able to comment on the severe situation of his age, yet through his academic research, obviously in that severe period of time, he still had something to express in his work and theory, i.e. he showed tremendous sympathy for individuals and their inner suffering, and what he really cared for were individuals, especially their value; he was quite against the idea of ignoring men's special personality and significance. Moreover, he assumed that everyone could make his/ her voice heard, understood and answered, which was basis of dialogue and polyphony theory [4].

2.2.1 Subjectivity

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin proposed "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousness, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky's novels" [2]. From his viewpoint, unlike the traditional novel, characters depicted were always submissive to their creator, i.e. the novelist; while in polyphonic novel, each of the characters belonged to oneself spiritually. Their unique personality and awareness is embodied in dialogues. In a word, the characters described there enjoy their own independence and subjectivity: this is the first feature of polyphony theory.

2.2.2 Dialogue

To be honest, the very essence of Bakhtin's polyphony theory refers to dialogue: i.e. confrontation of people, or that of "me" and "others". In terms of its category, there are two kinds of dialogue: dialogue among people; dialogue inside the depicted characters. Just as Bakhtin contended in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, a person enters into dialogue as an integral voice. He participates in it not only with the thoughts, but also with his entire individuality [2].

2.2.3 Unfinalizability

A third characteristic of polyphony is its open-endedness, or unfinalizability, which is closely connected with subjectivity and dialogue. Since people's self-consciousness and thinking never stops and thus if only one lives, there is no ending to one's thinking and conversations. Accordingly, polyphonic novel has a completely polyphonic ending. Furthermore precisely for that reason, from

the ordinary (that is the monologic) point of view, the novel remained uncompleted" [2].

2.3 Dialogue

Apparently, dialogue is the very foundation concerning Bakhtin's philosophy and aesthetics. In his opinion, the essence of life, thoughts, art and language all contributed to dialogue. It was based on his reflections on dialogue that he explored essence of men and ways of men's existence [4]. That is to say, dialogue serves as the means to realize self-realization and shape the true identities. That is the reason why in the following part, dialogue is analysed in *Beloved* in the order of Baby Suggs, Sethe, and Denver respectively. Since only with dialogues interpreted, the inner feelings and subjectivity of the three black women will be seen and explored profoundly.

3. TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*

3.1 Plots in "*Beloved*"

Beloved is a profound and complex novel that explores the harrowing effects of slavery on African Americans. The main plots of the novel revolve around the characters' struggles to come to terms with their traumatic past and find a way to move forward.

The story begins with "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom"[1] The baby was Sethe's daughter, whom she killed when the slave owner "school teacher" came. After that, she was viewed as a crazy and cruel black woman. Years later, the ghost of the baby got back and made the house haunted. Because of this, Sethe's two sons were too scared and run away from home, and her mother-in-law Baby Suggs died, and what's worse is that she could never have her husband back, who was absent from her life as well. Only Denver, her younger daughter was left with her on 124, Blue Stone Road.

Then, one day, a former slave, Paul D came and Sethe lived with him. It was Paul D who drove the haunting spirit away. After that, Sethe, Denver and Paul D lived in harmony, until one day, they went to participate in a carnival party. On the way back, they met a girl who looked very weak and out of sympathy, they took her home. As time went by, Sethe found out this girl named Beloved must be the one she killed before. Her love for Beloved was so thick that she was pretty committed to this relationship. However, Beloved was so greedy for

Sethe's love that she was jealous of Paul D, then she seduced him and drove him out of the house. At the same time, her greed for love tortured Sethe and made her weaker each day.

Denver also felt Beloved must be her elder sister who came back now. In the beginning, Denver felt it was so good to have a sister to play with and take care of, yet, gradually she noticed that her mother deteriorated due to Beloved's greed for her love. Then she realized that she had to protect her mother this time. Courageously, she went out of her house and asked for help. At the end, with the help of the neighbours, the mysterious girl Beloved was gone, and Denver and Sethe's life was restored.

First, it can be seen that, Sethe's memories of her time on the plantation are filled with brutality and inhumanity. She was subjected to physical and emotional abuse, and the constant threat of being separated from her children. Her decision to kill her daughter was an act of extreme love and desperation, as she saw it as the only way to protect her from the horrors of slavery.

What's more, the community's reaction to Sethe's past and the presence of Beloved also plays a significant role in the plot. Some members of the community are sympathetic and understanding, while others are judgemental and fearful. This subtle truth reflects the broader social issues of race and memory in post-slavery America.

Finally, the novel reaches its climax as Sethe finally confronts the truth of her past and begins to find a path towards healing and redemption. Through her journey, Morrison raises important questions about the nature of memory, forgiveness, and the lasting impact of slavery on generations of African Americans.

In conclusion, *Beloved* is a powerful and moving novel that weaves together multiple plotlines to create a rich and poignant portrait of a community struggling to come to terms with its history. The complex characters and their intertwined stories make for a compelling read that leaves a lasting impression on the reader.

3.2 Themes in "*Beloved*"

"Six million and more", is the line written on the title page of the novel. The number stands for the black died due to slavery. Slavery and its influence thereafter has cast a lasting impact on the black, or, in other words, the evil system's

aftereffect hurt the black even much more psychologically than physically. Even till today, its impact is not easy to be eliminated from the hearts of the black. This is the root of all adversity for American black people. The truth is, it brings endless torture and everlasting solitude to the black. The so called “chokecherry tree” on the back of Sethe, the killing of the baby Beloved, the isolation out of envy from the neighbourhood for many years, Paul D’s tragic animal-like life, etc, they are all evidence of the cruelty of slavery. Therefore, realization of the racial discrimination and to be heard, healed and redeemed is the core theme in *Beloved*. Only with this realization in mind, do the black slaves knew they had to flee from the evil plantation for their basic human rights: freedom.

On the other hand, love is another core theme in *Beloved*. In Sethe’s eyes, thin love is not love at all. [1] It can be seen how profoundly she loved her children and cherished them. She could not bear her children’s characteristics listed on the animal side of the paper.[1] That is why it is not hard to understand this infanticide because she believed what she had done was right because it came from true love.[1]. Additionally, Denver’s love for her mother Sethe is also embodied in her walking out of the house for hunting for a job and asking for help from the neighbourhood. All she has done: out of the house after many years of isolation and solitude, working to earn a living to support their life, is definitely out of her love for her mother Sethe.

Thus, it is quite explicit that under such an inhuman slavery system, a mother’s love for her children could be turned into such a bloody and unbearable affection. Such a beautiful and precious emotion could only be twisted and shown via a thrilling way under an evil slavery. This is the root and essence of the infanticide.

3.3 Structure in “*Beloved*”: Multi-voiced structure

As for structure, *Beloved* could be viewed as a river with a lot of undercurrents and vortexes. The whole story could be traced back to 1874 till 1973. With the past and the present mixed, the truth is gradually clear. At least, there are three aspects that can be seen as multi-voiced structure.

Initially, in the very beginning, the truth that the baby’s throat was cut by a handsaw is already told. Then, it is hinted again and again in the middle. But the whole scene of cutting throat of the baby is only

depicted in the middle of the novel. What’s more, the motivation of the killing becomes explicit just at the end even if it is mentioned many times in the novel.

Furthermore, the birth of Denver during Sethe’s flight is described via three different angles: the first mention started with Denver’s reflection; the second time, it was narrated to Beloved by Denver; the last time, It was Sethe, who told the whole story fully and made it a complete one.[1]

Eventually, in the second part of the novel, “You are mine”, from page 209-217, Sethe, Denver and Beloved, they chanted and imagined from their own perspective, constructing a multi-voiced chorus and symphony, which is typically the climax of this polyphonic novel. Just as Connor Lifson explained: This fragmentation of language culminates, in which it is often utterly unclear which of the three characters is narrating. Their subjectivities merge and overlap, and the interwoven narration refuses to make fully legible the family’s complex dynamics and individual perspectives. [6]

4. SUBJECTIVITY EMBODIED VIA DIALOGUE IN BELOVED

According to Bakhtin’s viewpoint, subjectivity in polyphonic novel means “creates not voiceless slaves(as does Zeus), but free people, capable of standing alongside their creator, capable of not agreeing with him and even of rebelling against him.”[2] In this case, subjectivity of polyphony just demonstrates that every figure depicted in a polyphonic novel has his/her free will, they are not submissive to the novelist’s ideology. On the contrary, their thoughts, understanding of the world, or certain event, must be independent from the author. This is just opposite to the traditional monologic novel in which the characters described actually depend on the whole viewpoints of the author.

Again, Bakhtin contended that major heroes are, not only objects of authorial discourse but also subjects of their own directly signifying discourse.[2]. Here, Bakhtin pointed out that though the major heroes in the novel are created by the author, to some extent, they are created as objects, yet, they are free as individual images, personality. [2] Once created, they are independent and free in their own destiny, which is not determined by the author. Accordingly, their feelings, ideas, love and

hatred belongs to themselves. They are masters of their own souls.

In the end, subjectivity from Bakhtin's viewpoint, could be understood as the consciousness of a character given as someone else's consciousness, another consciousness, yet at the same time it is not turned into an object, is not closed, does not become a simple object of the author's consciousness.[2] This shows that even one hero is given as someone else's consciousness, still, the nature of independence of consciousness is not changed, he/she does not become object of the author's consciousness, he/she still enjoy his/her consciousness at will.

In a word, in *Beloved*, via dialogues between the main characters, it can be seen that their subjectivity is still in their own hands, even when they were slaves. They are, in terms of consciousness, or subjectivity, in a world of autonomous subjects, not objects. [2] In the following part, Baby Suggs, Sethe and Denver will be studied in terms of subjectivity respectively.

4.1 *Baby the Preacher*

In *Beloved*, from page 87-89, Sethe called back the days when Baby Suggs, her mother-in-law, once preached to her black people in the Clearing. It was the highlight moment of Baby Suggs. This happened after her freedom was paid off by her son Halle's working on Saturdays and Sundays. [1] After this, Baby Suggs got back to 124 Bluestone and united with Sethe and her grandchildren.

Yet slave life had busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tounge, she had nothing left to make a living with but her heart.[1] Then, followed by every black man, woman, and child, Baby took them to the Clearing, a wide-open place cut deep in the woods. There she ordered the children to laugh, men to dance, and women to cry. It is in this way, Baby Suggs offered up to them her great big heart.[1]

It was also in the Clearing, Baby Suggs, for the first time, awakened the black people by asking them to love their flesh, eyes, skin, hands, mouth, feet, neck, liver, beating heart, private parts, and love the heart, because this is the prize.[1] After that, she said no more, she stood up and danced with her twisted hip.

Besides, she also had her own viewpoints on the past history and slavery: "lay em down, Sethe. Sword and Shield, Down. Down, Both of em

down."; "Good is knowing when to stop"; "Those white things have taken all I had or dreamed, and broke my heartstrings too. There is no bad luck in the world but white folks." [1]

From what was said by Baby Suggs, it can be seen that, she is a woman with her own feelings and thoughts. As a former slave, she had no rights of her own body: her eight children had six fathers.[1] As for her children, no doubt, to make up for hearing that her two girls, neither of whom had their adult teeth, were sold and gone and she had not been able to wave goodbye.[1] The only son whom she kept the longest, Halle, never got back to her till the end. That is what she suffered as a slave. Yet, after she gained her liberty and settled in 124 Bluestone, her subjectivity was awakened, she gathered all her black people and helped them to express themselves in language and cleared their bitterness in the Clearing. She also told them to love their body that was not accepted by the white. She had got a soul that was awakened, with such a reasoning power.

4.2 *Sethe the Killer*

Sethe is the key figure in the whole novel. She is such a unique character that can not be described in a few words. What she went through could be summarized as follows: she was a slave at Sweet Home with the big family. The slave owner Mr. Gardner seemed to be a good one. Then Sethe married Halle, and was pregnant and they had two sons and two daughters. After that, Sweet Home was managed by school teacher, then the life of the slaves became worse. Sethe's mother-in-law Baby Suggs went back to 124 Bluestone and later Sethe got united with her. Now Halle was absent, and school teacher came to catch Sethe and children to go back to the plantation. Sethe did not want her children to be tortured by the slave owners, thus she killed the third child with a handsaw. Due to this, she was put into prison for some time. Later, she came back, yet the house was haunted, that was what made her two sons scared and fled away. Besides, her mother-in-law Baby Suggs finally died, and she was left with Denver in the haunted house.

Sethe's subjectivity has been embodied as follows:

Subjectivity in Sethe is shown in a few moments in the novel *Beloved*, especially reflected in her reaction to the school teacher — her infanticide. Many years later, when Paul D talked with her about this event, her thoughts were quite

clear: I stopped him. I took and put my babies where they'd be safe.[1] When Paul D contended that her love was too thick, Sethe argued that love is or ain't. Thin love ain't love at all.[1] It is quite clear that slavery is the one to be blamed. It is so evil that men are twisted in every aspect of life because of it. As a woman, Sethe could not enjoy a common life with her husband, they were not permitted to live an ordinary life. As a mother, she could not have her children with her and lived a peaceful life. What's more, when the slave owner came and fetched her and her children, the only place that is safe in her mind is a place where the white people can not get to, that is death. It is quite sad and ironic: for a mother in such a twisted era, killing was the only choice. This black woman does not want to be hurt and destroyed by the white anymore, she had her independent thought, i.e. she had her own subjectivity. This subjectivity guaranteed her a choice or an option, not to be submissive and passive, but, on the contrary, pretty rebellious.

Hence, because of her thick love, and the willingness of not having her children's characteristics listed on the animal side of the paper. No. Oh no. May be Baby Suggs could worry about it, live with the likelihood of it; Sethe had refused — and refused still.[1]. Though this event, in the eyes of Paul D, even of everyone else, it was wrong, yet from Sethe's opinion, what she had done was right because it came from true love.[1]

4.3 *Denver the Defender*

Denver is the only child left to Sethe in the haunted house on Bluestone Road. Because of the haunting spirit and the fear for Sethe, her two brothers left the house, and her grandma Baby Suggs got weak and died later. Denver and Sethe were isolated from the outside world. She was closed off from the hurt of the hurt world, Denver's imagination produced its own hunger and its own food, which she badly needed because loneliness wore her out. Worn her out. Veiled and protected by the live green walls, she felt ripe and clear, and salvation was as easy as a wish.[1]

Then, *Beloved* came in the body of a young lady, and this is something that made their life different. In the beginning, Denver felt it good to have some one to play with, yet as time went by, *Beloved's* greed for love from Sethe escalated and Sethe's shape changed and worn down, almost to death. It was this time that Denver's subjectivity became clearer and clearer. As she realised that she

understood the connection between her mother and *Beloved*: Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; *Beloved* was making her pay for it. But there would never be an end to that, and seeing her mother diminished shamed and infuriated her.[1]

After this realization, Denver figured out that somebody had to be saved, but unless Denver got work, there would be no one to save, no one to come home to, and no Denver either. It was a new thought, having a self to look out for and preserve.[1]

Then Denver went out of the house, looking for a job; besides, courageously, she asked for help from the neighbourhood to drive the ghost away from her home. On the day when the thirty women came and prayed outside the house, Sethe, in her illusion, thought somebody wanted to take her best thing again, just like many years ago, she tried to stab Mr. Bodwin. It was Denver who stopped her. The next morning, Paul D saw her on the way to work, they talked for a while. From their dialogue, it can be seen without any doubt that Denver was already an independent girl.

“Well, if you want my opinion”—

“I don't, I have my own”.

“You grown”.

“Yes, sir.”[1]

5. CONCLUSION

In this paper, with polyphony as the basic foundation and theory, the author attempted to study subjectivity of the black women in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*. Even though subjectivity has been investigated on this novel before, yet this is the first time Bakhtinian dialogue and subjectivity is applied. This is the value of the whole paper, which offers a brand new perspective to understand the splendor, complexity and abundance of this great novel. Thus Bakhtinian angle makes it possible to appreciate the masterpiece from much more diverse and complicated facets. Because of this, its aesthetical charm and power could be seen much more plainly.

What's more, with the subjectivity analysed and demonstrated clearly in the study, one can truly feel the cruelty and evilness of the slavery system, and be aware that the root of all adversity comes from the wickedness of unequal and disrespectful relations among people.

In addition, from dialogue and thus subjectivity shown in the study, black people's inner trauma and voice is heard loudly. Finally they could obtain the right of speech and can express themselves effectively and construct their subjectivity. [5] Consequently, they are healed only when their cry and voice is heard.

Due to the time limitation and the research capacity, there must be some limitation in the study: such as, the material is not sufficient to support analysis of the whole study. Accordingly, in the future, the researcher will continue to carry on the research in *Beloved* with more materials and efforts from more creative and constructive perspectives.

In conclusion, the paper calls for more attention to the significance of Bakhtinian dialogue and subjectivity, and its application in more great literature works. Since he deemed that as a human being with a living spirit, one must never stop thinking, fighting for the rights of one's own, resolving endless problems in life in a constant manner. One's spirit never dies. That's the legacy he had made and continues to inspire people in any situation, in any culture. That is also the same legacy *Beloved* has left in our beating hearts.

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