

# From Identity Crisis to Identity Construction: A Study of Identity Issues in *Beloved*

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**Abstract**—The 1993 Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison is one of the most prominent black female writers in contemporary American literature. *Beloved* is her very outstanding work and wins the Pulitzer Prize for Best Novel. It reveals the darkness of slavery and its torture towards the blacks. This paper tries to show the tragic destiny of the blacks, criticize the extremely negative influence of cultural hegemony and the other, and explore ways to construct identity. The colonialism and racism of cultural hegemony and the other are the prime causes of identity crisis. The blacks should face the miserable history bravely, dissolve the erosion of white culture, recover and develop black culture on the basis of traditional culture. Only in this way, can they come out of the shadow and obtain true freedom.

**Index Terms**—*Beloved*, cultural hegemony, identity construction, the other

## I. INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison born on February 18, 1931 is the first black female writer that wins the Nobel Prize in the United States history. Most of Toni Morrison's works focus on the loss and reconstruction of African-American identity, revealing the conflicts between black faith and white values. *Beloved* is one of Toni Morrison's masterpieces, which won the Pulitzer Prize for the Best Novel, a milestone in the history of American literature. *Beloved* is based on a true story. Toni Morrison created the protagonist Sethe in *Beloved* with the prototype of story. In order to prevent her daughter from becoming a slave and repeating her tragic fate, Sethe resolutely kills her two-year-old daughter. Eighteen years later, the ghost of daughter, who is killed by her, returns to her life to torture her spirit. Finally, with the help of the black community, Sethe steps out of the shadow in the past and begins to live a new life. This paper attempts to show the pathetic and miserable fate of blacks, analyze the reasons for the blacks' identity crisis and explore the ways of identity construction.

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper centers on three key terms, cultural hegemony, the other and identity construction. These three key terms will be explained in detail.

### A. The Connotation of Cultural Hegemony

The cultural hegemony is proposed by Gramsci, an Italian ideologist. He believed that the dominant class controlled the concept of another class not through external coercion, but

through the unconscious influence [1]. Postcolonial theorists disseminate Gramsci's idea of cultural hegemony to the world and believe cultural hegemony exist throughout the entire process of colonialism. Culture is another tool for white people to dominate the blacks except military, politics, and economy. The control of education and language is the main form of the cultural hegemony. In *Beloved*, cultural hegemony is reflected in the invasion of colonial ideology and patriarchal ideology.

From the invasion of colonial ideology aspect, cultural hegemony as a subtle form that carries the whites' ideology weakens the influence of the blacks' ideology through penetration and assimilation day by day. Whites always think their culture is the best and believe they are the defenders of modern civilization while blacks' culture is marginalized and barbaric. "Whites believe that blacks need not take higher education, some of the basic industrial training is enough for them, even those basic skills are serviced for Caucasians" [2]. At the same time, from passive to active, from the feeling of insult and oppression to adaption, the blacks gradually accept the distortions and misunderstandings that the whites' culture has brought them. They even judge themselves with whites' standards. Therefore, they think they are ugly because of their dark skin and curly hair, they feel ashamed of their race, and gradually begin to hate themselves.

From the invasion of patriarchal ideology aspect, the black women not only suffer the same racial discrimination as the black men, but also suffer the oppression of the black men. Patriarchal ideology is an important part of cultural hegemony, especially in relationship between men and women. Spivak thinks that women are not as superior as men so the order of social class is white men, white women, the men of other races and the women of other races [3]. This patriarchal ideology results in the black women's suffering of gender oppression from both white men and black men.

### B. The Connotation of the Other

The other is a concept that is relative to self and it stresses the differences and diversity. It refers to all other people and things that exist except self, no matter what form they appear in, whether they can be seen or not, perceived or not. Both the other and self belong to the category of identity. Bhabha [4] argues that the use of the concept of identity means that some people are defined in a certain attribute in order to distinguish them from other people and it results in a series of inequalities. Self cannot exist without the other. It means the other is a reference that is different from and related to self. Self and the other will change with different references. From the perspective of the relationship between men and women, men regard women as the other and subordinate women to them. From the perspective of the relationship between the East and the West, the West regards the East as the other and

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establishes its dominance and self. From the perspective of the relationship between the whites and the blacks, the whites regard the blacks as the other and deny their human status. The constructions reflect the power relation, in which the other is the vulnerable subordinate part.

In *Beloved*, the whites are self while the blacks are the other. Because of their skin, the blacks suffer a lot of discrimination, such as racial discrimination, racial segregation, economic and political injustice. The whites and the blacks are totally different in appearance. By comparison, in terms of skin, the whites are white, the blacks are dark; in terms of eyes, whites are blue, blacks are black; in terms of hair, whites are blond, blacks are blowzy curly; in terms of lips, whites are thin, blacks are thick; in terms of nose, whites are towering, blacks are wide; in terms of forehead, whites are wide, blacks are narrow. Thus, the whites think that they are intelligent, well-developed and elegant while the blacks are vulgar, inferior and ugly. If there are no blacks existing, the whites cannot establish their consciousness and authority.

During the slavery period, the slaveholder who is white has the human right and social status but the slaves are considered as animals or commodities, not men. The blacks become the other through the process of denying their human status, destructing their families and depriving their love. This process causes traumas of the blacks, such as physiological destruction, psychological distortion and cultural marginalization. Thus, it can be seen that the blacks become the other and lose their identity gradually in the shadow of the white supremacy society.

### *C. The Connotation of Identity Construction*

Human beings always engage in the formation of identity and their identity is formed in the interaction between self and society. The colonial history of the blacks deeply affects the certification of their identity. Whites' violent control, economic oppression and the control of ideology and language lead to the loss of black identity. Name is the best example. When the blacks are brought to America, they are taken away their own names and forced to accept the whites' name. For blacks, the name is extremely important. Name not only stands for individual but also for family and tribe. Therefore, the name is the memory of the entire race. The loss of name means the loss of national identity and the breaking of cultural bond.

"Who am I? Where am I from? Where am I going?" [4]. These problems seem easy but hard to solve. If the blacks want to figure out these questions, they must finish identity construction. In the process of identity construction, rememory of history plays a key role. According to Bhabha [4], "Remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful remembering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present" [4]. Only facing that painful three hundred years bravely, can the blacks come out of the shadow and awaken their national consciousness. The identity is related to the development direction of a nation. Identity construction tells how the disadvantaged groups get rid of hegemony and obtain their status.

### III. THE REASONS FOR IDENTITY CRISIS

Cultural hegemony and the other are two main reasons for identity crisis in *Beloved*. Cultural hegemony is mainly

reflected in the invasion of colonial and patriarchal ideology, and the other is mainly reflected in the animalized and commodified blacks.

#### *A. Cultural Hegemony Reflected in Beloved*

Cultural hegemony achieves the control of human thought in daily life. Whites' control of blacks is first manifested in the control of their language [5]. The blacks have no right to speak in front of the whites. In the book, when Sixo defends for stealing the shoat, the schoolteacher beats him fiercely. In schoolteacher's view, as a slave, Sixo has no right to use language and logic and also has no right to express his opinion [6]. The definition belongs to the definers not the people who are defined. Therefore, Sixo's arbitrary definition of theft is a challenge and a threat to the rule of slave owners.

Besides the slave owners' control of speaking right, the mass media try to paralyze the blacks and influence them by cultural penetration policy. As an important part of mass media, newspaper is controlled by whites and it advocates that the whites are superior to the blacks. With long-term erosion, the ideology is rooted in each person's consciousness, resulting in blacks' self-denial at last. In *Beloved*, in order to celebrate family reunion, Baby Suggs holds a dinner party for blacks in the community, but this generous behavior causes envy from other blacks who do not understand why Baby has much more than they have even if she is also a black. Happiness is only for whites, while being oppressed and exploited is for blacks. So, when the schoolteacher comes to chase Sethe, no one informs Sethe or Baby Suggs in the black community. As a result, the tragedy of infanticide happens. For infanticide incident, whites report the brutality of blacks exaggeratedly and negate the motherhood of blacks, but they do not report the fundamental reason is cruel slavery. The blacks' view of infanticide is based on newspaper, so the majority of blacks accept the reports from whites and do not understand Sethe's behavior, gradually isolating Sethe and her family. The unity of the black community is destroyed.

In a patriarchal society, men control almost all political, economic, cultural and social resources, so men are considered much more powerful than women both physically and mentally. Although the white women have the Feminism Movement, it does not make any sense to black women. Because of the invasion of colonial and patriarchal ideology, the black women are at the lowest racial and gender status and they suffer the oppression from both white men and black men. During the journey to America, Sethe's mother and Nan are raped by white crew over and over again and even pregnant. They have no right to choose their sex mates meanwhile the white crew only regard them as a tool to indulge sexual desire. Ella, another miserable black woman, is captured by a white man and his son. After that, she suffers the sexual abuse from these two white men for a long time.

Besides rape from white men, the black women suffer the discrimination from black men at the same time. When Sethe tells Paul D that she escapes from Sweet Home successfully by herself when she is pregnant, Paul D is proud of her but he is also annoyed because she has done it without the help of any man. In Paul's patriarchal thought, women do not have the ability to accomplish such a difficult thing. The erosion of whites' culture exists in every aspect so that the black men

follow the rules of whites unconsciously. When Paul D is seduced by the ghost, he proposes to have a baby with Sethe to help him resist the temptation. This detail implies Paul's possessiveness and superiority as a male. In male-dominated society, both mothers and children would be subordinate to men and become an appendage of the patriarchal society.

#### *B. The Other Reflected in Beloved*

During the period of the slavery, the blacks are excluded from the society because the whites think the blacks do not fit into their society. In *Beloved*, the blacks are devalued to the position of the other that they are half-human and half-animal creatures. Just as the schoolteacher says "No, no. That's not the way. I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don't forget to line them up" [7].

The blacks that are animalized can be found in some details. First of all, with the belief that the blacks have characteristics of animal, the schoolteacher would like to collect some scientific data. He uses tools to measure slaves' bodies. According to Sethe, "Schoolteacher wrap the string all over my head, cross my nose, around my behind. Number my teeth" [7]. For the schoolteacher, Sethe provides a possibility to show how the racial other is different from the whites. What's more, Sethe is observed, studied and recorded as an object when she is robbed milk by schoolteacher's two nephews. "I am full God damn it of two boys with mossy teeth, one sucking on my breast the other holding me down, their book-reading teacher watching and writing it up" [7]. By watching the rape and recording it in the book, the schoolteacher strengthens his colonial power but Sethe is devalued to subhuman position even more. Such atrocities to the other not only violate their maternal love but also deprive their basic human rights. Last but not least, besides comparing the blacks with animals, the schoolteacher also treats them as animals. When the schoolteacher finds Sethe planning to run away from Sweet Home, he beats her fiercely, just leaving a "bitter cherry tree" scar on her back. His way of controlling slaves is similar to that of controlling animals. Sethe finally understands that slaves are animals rather than human in the sight of the whites. The colonial system emphasizes that animality is the racial difference between the whites and blacks. The whites dehumanize the blacks as the other by denying their human status and depriving their human rights step by step. At last, the blacks are confused about knowing themselves and entirely despise themselves.

In the times of slavery, the blacks are not only considered to be subhuman but also commodities. As the commodities that can be freely bought and sold, "they are got rented out, loaned out, bought out, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen, or sized by their slaveholders at will" [7]. Some slaveholders describe the blacks as "stupid treasure" or even "black baboon". They think that the blacks who are inferior can be protected only by slavery. Thus, it can be seen that the commodified blacks have lost their freedom as well as their identity. There is no parameter that can help to define them as human beings. As the slaveholders' private property, the destiny of blacks is closely related to the value that they create. In other words, when slaveholders think a slave can create the value that they want, the slave can continue to live; if not, he is in danger of being killed.

#### IV. THE WAYS OF IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

A race cannot live without the identity. The awakening of consciousness is the premise of identity construction. The task of identity construction in *Beloved* is passed from generation to generation until it is completed.

##### *A. The Awakening Consciousness of Three Generations*

As the first generation in *Beloved*, Baby Suggs has typical features of being oppressed. The oppression of slavery deprives her freedom and makes her become mentally insensible. During her sixty years in the Sweet Home, many children are born but she doesn't know where they are. She has no soul, no thoughts for 60 years, and she only knows doing the things that the slaveholder asks her to do. She never knows how to express her opinion, just like a dead man. It is not until her son, Halle redeems her freedom that she feels she is truly free, and her body and mind belong to her own. When Baby Suggs is liberated, she, a female slave who is nearly 60 years old and walks like a three-legged dog is shocked by this sudden freedom. She is surprised and says: "These are my hands, these are my hands" [7]. Baby Suggs' sudden awareness not only implies that the persecution of slavery is serious, but also reflects her awakening consciousness.

Sethe, the second generation in *Beloved* is Baby's daughter-in-law and Denver's mother. Sethe is a timid, tender and obedient slave at first. In Sweet Home, she is paralyzed by the wonderful fantasy created by Mr. Garner. Although she can cook and sew, she is scarcely literate and she knows little about identity. However, she dares to express her love for family. This shows she does not succumb to slavery and she has her own consciousness. As a matter of fact, it is not until Sethe escapes from the Sweet Home that she realizes her loss of identity. At 124 Bluestone Road, Sethe for the first time feels completely happy and liberated. During the brief twenty-eight days, she makes friends with other blacks in the community and enjoys the happiness of family reunion. She does not want to be the slave again whose fate is controlled and decided by slaveholder. Instead, she wants to become a new self, a person with self-consciousness. Unfortunately, the arrival of the schoolteacher forces her to cut her child's throat because she doesn't want her child to repeat her tragic fate. The murder is the starting point of Sethe's awakening consciousness. She uses murder to show her protest against the inhuman slavery.

Denver, who is the third generation is the youngest woman in *Beloved*. Before the emergence of ghost, Denver is unable to construct her own identity because she is overprotected and has no friends. Her awakening consciousness of self originates from the complex relationship between her and her mother. Ghost's coming let Denver feel her strength and find the meaning of self. On the one hand, Denver comes to realize that the history of black women is related to her life, so she regards ghost as a sister and close friend. On the other hand, Denver knows Sethe's dilemma that she is tormented by the infanticide incident. The only way to rescue her is to help her get rid of the painful past [8].

##### *B. Identity Construction of Three Generations*

After her consciousness is awakened, Baby Suggs wants to spread this awareness to black community. Therefore, she

begins to work as a preacher to convey this idea to everyone. She encourages black people to love their bodies, such as eyes and skin, especially their mouths. When she mentions the mouth, she uses more words to describe it because mouth is an organ that the blacks can use to speak out their thoughts loudly. As a teacher, Baby Suggs becomes the spiritual leader of the town. She leads the blacks in the community to live for themselves, fighting against racial discrimination and construct their identity. Under her lead, the whole black community increases cohesiveness and unites well. Under her guidance, the blacks can boldly release their inner feelings, admiring the value of human nature. She holds a ceremony similar to an exorcism, encouraging the blacks not to indulge in the current pain, exhorting that the pain as a slave should be left behind and all blacks should start to know the self. It means pursue what the blacks lose and possess, and pursue the history and new future. The identity construction of the first generation is about moralizing. This seems ordinary but has far-reaching influence. Baby lays a solid foundation for the blacks' identity construction in the future.

The return of ghost plays a decisive role in Sethe's identity construction. Before the emergence of ghost, Sethe's identity construction is stagnant. She deliberately avoids confronting the inner self, which hinders the formation of identity. The arrival of ghost completely changes this situation. Sethe begins to recall the tragic past. She realizes that avoiding or denying the past will make her lose self. Only by dealing with the relationship between her and ghost well, can she finish the identity construction. In addition, Paul D helps her find the self-recognition. He reminds her that herself is the best thing in the world and she has the right to live a better life. In short, Sethe's actions show that she is a progressive woman. She knows that her nation is at the bottom of the world so she has no rights and freedom. She resists social injustice with her own behavior and she desires a free, equal and peaceful life. All in all, the second generation attempts to construct identity bravely.

With the awakening consciousness, Denver walks out of the 124 and asks the black community for help. Throughout the spring, the neighbors send her family various foods from time to time. Besides, Denver finds a job so she finds her confidence and self-esteem. When Paul D meets her again, he finds her eyes are firmer than ever before, just like her father, Halle. Denver's ridicule towards him has gone. Instead, a smile of kindness and firmness is on her face. She completes the identity construction and becomes a new black woman with dignity and self-consciousness. Denver chooses a right way to rescue Sethe that is keeping a correct attitude towards history. Black women who want to complete the identity construction successfully should face the past bravely and step into the future confidently. There is no doubt that Denver has become a representative of new black women.

## V. CONCLUSION

This paper has made a study on Toni Morrison's outstanding work, *Beloved*. It centers on three key terms,

cultural hegemony, the other and identity construction, showing the pathetic and miserable fate of the blacks, analyzing the reasons for the blacks' identity crisis and exploring the way to construct the blacks' identity. First of all, due to the invasion of colonial and patriarchal ideology, the blacks suffer the racial and gender oppression from the whites and these two heavy burdens limit the development of identity. What's more, with the erosion of racism, the blacks are animalized and commodified as the other. They are regarded as half-human and half-animal creatures and can be trade at will. Therefore, the blacks lost their identity gradually in the shadow of the white supremacy society. Last but not least, in order to change this image, the blacks try to construct their identity. Only facing that painful three hundred years bravely and uniting together, can the blacks come out of the shadow and construct their identity successfully.

All in all, this paper takes Baby Suggs, Sethe and Denver three generations as clues to show the process of blacks' identity crisis to identity construction, revealing that basing on the traditional culture and focusing on the reality are the right way for the blacks to develop. Besides, the ghost's influence on the black community construction needs more scholars' insightful study.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Z.Q. conducted the research and wrote the paper; S.Y. checked and corrected the mistakes during the research process.

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