

A Study of Trauma Metaphor in Morrison's Novels

Liting Wang^{1,*}

¹ School of Foreign Languages, Anshan Normal University, Anshan, Liaoning, China

*Corresponding author. Email: 597182898@qq.com

ABSTRACT

"Trauma" is one of the important themes in Morrison's novels. In recent years, many critics has applied the theory of trauma to interpret the work of Morrison, especially to analyze the trauma of black women in her works by combining her identity as a black woman writer with the theory of feminist criticism. This thesis breaks through the limitation of interpreting Morrison's works from the perspective of feminism and racism, and tries to show the unspeakable traumatic experience of black children in different historical periods with the help of trauma theory and related concepts in psychology and psychoanalysis. At the same time, with the analysis and discussion of Morrison's narrative techniques of using different narrative perspectives to express the symptoms of black children's trauma, this thesis reveals the methods of healing explored in her works. Finally, it explains her political consciousness and cultural stand.

Keywords: Trauma metaphor, Psychological trauma, Toni Morrison.

1. INTRODUCTION

Morrison has written altogether twelve novels, revealing all kinds of trauma suffered by African Americans in nearly 200 years. Her works mainly deal with the physical and mental trauma brought to the African Americans by slavery, the oppression of the white mainstream culture, racial discrimination, and express the author's thoughts on the various aspects of human existence, such as good and evil, love and hate, beauty and ugliness, life and death. In her writing, Morrison pays special attention to the living conditions of African American women and African American children. What she wanted to express most was the devastation that racism inflicted on people, especially the most vulnerable and needy African American women and children [2]. Ten of her twelve works are about the trauma of African American children, which reflects the author's concern and thinking about the survival of them. Her most recent novel *God Help the Child* takes the "childhood trauma" of the protagonists Bride and Booker as the starting point, it shows the psychological trauma that African American children suffer in contemporary society from all kinds of people. Therefore, the narrative of African American children's trauma is another focus of the author and it has important research value. With the

narration of the "childhood trauma" of black children in different periods of American history, Morrison shows the social, family, school and other life changes that African American children have suffered since the time of slavery to the 21st century. Her works reveal the social problems from different types of trauma they suffer, different attitudes towards trauma and different ways of coping with trauma, which reflects her attention to the living condition of African American people and her reflection on how do they re-understand themselves and gain self-subjectivity. With the help of the trauma suffered by the most vulnerable and marginalized children in the African American community, Morrison focused on the problems of race relations, violence, interpersonal barriers and other problems existing in contemporary American society.

2. TRAUMA WRITING AND TRAUMA METAPHOR

By reading relevant works of African American writers and examining relevant study on them, it can be seen that current scholars' research on African American literature mainly focuses on feminism, post-colonialism, and mythological archetype criticism. Most scholars pay their attention on the black female images. In recent

years, there has also been research on the black male images created by female writers, but there is not enough study on the black children images yet. The traumatic experience of minority children has been the focus of academic attention in recent years. Therefore, it is of great significance to use trauma theory to study the trauma of black children written by African American writers. It is meaningful to analyze the root of the loss of self-subjectivity of the adult African American people through the analysis of their traumatic experiences in childhood, thus we can have a better understanding of the sources of their psychological and physiological alienation and distortion of the adulthood. Only by understanding them in childhood can we understand them better when they are adults, and find out the real reasons that lead to the loss of black self-subjectivity more comprehensively, so as to help them recover their lost self-subjectivity and rebuild their racial confidence. The growth of children concerns the future of the entire nation.

On the one hand, to interpret the trauma of African American children in Morrison's works from the perspective of trauma theory can be integrated with the previous research results, which focused on the trauma of black women. It is conducive to a more comprehensive understanding of the characteristics of Morrison's trauma narrative and broadening the research field of Morrison's works by applying this theory. On the other hand, taking African American children as the research object, the readers can understand the characteristics of children's trauma and enrich the trauma theory. At the same time, the study on the recovery of African American children is helpful for them to get rid of the shackles of the wounds perpetuated by slavery, interrupt the intergenerational transmission of the wounds, and walk out of the shadow of the wounds [3]. Literary works are the product of individual consciousness, so the development of a writer's self-consciousness can be seen through literary works. The transformation of the metaphorical source domain in Morrison's novels reflects her development of self-consciousness and different cultural standpoint.

Morrison's early works accuse the cruel acts of the white and, and is consistent with her earlier cultural stand of opposing white humanity and sympathizing with the suffering of black people. Her later narratives gradually become mild and rational. Morrison's later works are mainly devoted to thinking about how to help black children to recover from trauma through black and white racial

and black internal dialogue [4]. In this way, the traumatic memory can be restored through equal communication between different cultures, so as to achieve the purpose of healing the trauma, and it can also cause self-reflection and introspection. This helps to establish a self-governing and democratic racial system. This change of attitude is consistent with a revised cultural stance she gave in the interview in the early 2000s. She believed that African Americans should not just complain, but should do something themselves to change the situation.

3. SCENE METAPHOR AND CHARACTER METAPHOR IN *BELOVED*

In the related studies on metaphor, it is generally believed that the application of metaphor has not been limited to the application of rhetoric study, but has been further extended and expanded to the multi-angle expression in the aspects of thought and behavior [6]. In this application, metaphor and culture are combined. To put it in another way, metaphor constitutes the symbol of a culture [5]. In such cultural symbols, metaphor often serves as a bridge between cultures and also represents the essence and essence of a certain culture. At this time, the metaphorical content in the novel not only includes the characteristics and basic contents of the culture in its own category, but also summarizes and expresses the values of a culture it represents. The analysis and appreciation of literary works from the perspective of conceptual metaphor can help us to have a better interpretation of those literary works.

Morrison's works profoundly reflect the tragic fate of African American women and praise the spirit of their indomitable struggle against fate, which has made great contributions to the development of African American literature. *Beloved* was published in 1988 and instantly became an international sensation. This novel reveals the traumatic relationship between mother and daughter caused by slavery and tells the cruelty of the slavery with a unique narrative of trauma experience. In the process of narration, Morrison uses a variety of themes to enrich the whole work. At the same time, she also uses a variety of rhetorical devices, such as metaphor and symbolism, which makes the whole work more expressive. The use of metaphor enriches the meaning of the novel. When reading, the readers can also analyze the real meaning behind the

metaphors, and the process of analysis is a process of understanding literary classics. Among many metaphors, the scene is an important carrier for the development of the story. Without the scene, the story cannot be unfolded. And the scene people are in often has a lot to do with the development of the story.

In *Beloved*, the setting is mainly in Sweet Home and 124. The author used a lot of words to describe the stories happening in these two places. Sweet Home was a plantation. Although it had a very beautiful name, the slaves on this plantation still lived in pain and did not get warmth and care. It was a charming place, as we could imagine in Sethe's recollection, but there was much dark about the place under its beautiful name. We can say that Sweet Home is a good metaphor for the ideal project of white culture, and this metaphor is a negative one, a sweet metaphor for the evil and dark side of slavery. Another key factor in a novel is character. The characters are the essence and soul of the whole work, and the characterization of the characters is the most important part of a novel. She has endless milk, selfless love and tenacious vitality. So Sethe is actually a symbol of motherhood, and we can see the archetype of black motherhood in her.

She kept emphasizing the fact that someone had taken her milk, which symbolized the whites' assault on the black man's humanity. Sethe's maternal love is a kind of selfless and strong love, showing her selflessness and dedication in words and actions, as well as her strength as a mother. In the white-dominated America, the African American culture has been completely washed away by the white culture, so the values of the whole society have also been seriously impacted. African Americans had no status at all, so Sethe's daughter was born to inherit her mother's identity, a slave to be bought and sold and trampled on at will. In order to change this situation, she cruelly killed his daughter. She did everything she could to get away from the farm and give her baby, who was still in her womb, a healthy environment. Therefore, Sethe's act of killing her daughter is a metaphor for her resistance to this injustice, a choice made after suffering and weighing by herself.

4. BODY METAPHOR AND COLOR METAPHOR IN *GOD HELP THE CHILD*

God Help the Child is Morrison's eleventh and final novel. As Morrison's first attempt at the subject of contemporary American social reality, this work has attracted intense attention from critics and readers since its publication. This novel takes the journey of a black girl, Bride as the main line to connect the traumas suffered by various characters in their childhood including her missing boyfriend.

Therefore, childhood trauma and its negative impact on the growth of children is one of the focus of academic research on the novel. Wang Shouren and Wu Xinyun (2016) demonstrated the impact of contemporary American social problems such as racial discrimination and sexual violence on children, and emphasized the healing effect of "speak" on the injured [9]. Pang Haonong (2017) summarized the trauma suffered by the characters in Morrison's works as family trauma, visual trauma and judicial trauma [8]. Pang also analyzed the alienation of kinship, disposition and identity caused by the three kinds of trauma respectively.

In many of Morrison's works, the body has always been an image with special meaning. Body writing is a common witness of racism to individual trauma in postcolonial literary works. It is a common writing technique in many works to use body as a metaphor for the theme of novels and the cognition of characters. It is worth noticing that the narrative of other trauma in *God Help the Child* also shows a subtle sensory dimension. By means of the combination of touch, vision, hearing and taste, Morrison presents the multidimensional trauma suffered by the protagonist Bride as an African American woman in contemporary America and the healing process of her trauma vividly. In the novel, Bride was born as a dark-skinned girl. Her mother hated her, and her light-skinned father abandoned the family because he doubted whether Bride was his own daughter.

In Bride's childhood, black has been endowed with a thorough metaphorical meaning of "dislike, disgust and discrimination", which symbolizes the oppression of American social and cultural values on the human nature of black people and the oppression of black lives. Morrison, however, spends more time on white than black in this novel. The contradiction between white and black is the symbiosis of purity and filth, and the transformation of the protagonist's identity

alienation. As she grew up, Brad began wearing only white in different shades to emphasize her dark skin. At that time, slavery had been abolished in the United States, and anti-racism had been formally written into the laws of the United States. The aesthetic and value orientation of "black is beautiful" seemed to be popular throughout the whole country.

However, Bride's change of attitude towards black skin and his enthusiasm for white clothes reflect the blind conformity of blacks to white standards of beauty. Both the aesthetic values of "white supremacy" and "black is beautiful"[7] reflect that the mainstream values of white people have a great impact on the identity of black people, and this is the external expression of the internal colonization of black people [1]. By using the metaphor of black and white, Morrison reveals the physical and mental trauma suffered by the black people under the white cultural hegemony. Black people's identity consciousness becomes blurred, their aesthetic consciousness becomes alienated, and their cultural consciousness gradually loses, symbolizing their inner confusion and confusion. At the end of the novel, under the guidance and encouragement of his aunt Queen, Booker and Bride talk to each other about their traumatic childhood experiences, clear up their misunderstandings and get back together. By the way of "speaking", Booker actively communicates with others, unties his heart knot, and finally walks out of the shadow of the pain caused by the loss of his brother's. At this moment, he returns to inner peace and no longer needs to comfort himself with the help of the trumpet. The scene of him throwing away the trumpet symbolizes that Booker has really healed from the trauma and gained growth.

5. CONCLUSION

Literary works are the product of individual consciousness, so the development of a writer's self-consciousness can be seen through literary works. The transformation of Morrison's narrative strategy in her early and latter creation shows the continuous progress and development of her self-consciousness. At the same time, it also reflects the different cultural standpoint of her. Her early works mainly focused on alleviating the trauma of black children by "accusing" the cruel acts of white people and "witnessing" the traumatic history of black people. This is consistent with her earlier cultural stance of "opposing white humanity and sympathizing with the suffering of black people".

Her later narratives gradually become mild and rational, focusing on thinking about how to help black children get rid of trauma through the "dialogue" between black and white race and black people. Restoring traumatic memory through equal communication between different cultures can achieve the purpose of trauma healing. Moreover, it can cause self-reflection and introspection, and establish a self-subjectivity and democratic racial system.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is independently completed by Liting Wang.

REFERENCES

- [1] B. Berlin & P. Kay: *Basic Color Terms: Their University and Evolution*, Berkeley, California University. Press, 1969.
- [2] B. Cecil. Interview with Toni Morrison[J]. *The Massachusetts Review*, 1995.
- [3] C. Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. Baltimore and Marryland: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.
- [4] C.Jing. *Trauma Narrative Study of Black Children in Toni Morrison's Novels*[D].Northwest Normal University. 2017.
- [5] D. F. Shu. *Studies in Metaphor*[M].Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2000.
- [6] G. Lakoff & M. Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By*[M].Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.
- [7] M. Toni. *God Help the Child*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015.
- [8] P. Haonong. Trauma and Alienation — God will Save the Child from the perspective of social ethics [J]. *Social Sciences in Beijing* (6): 4-11.2017.
- [9] W.Shouren & W. Xinyun. Walk out of the shadow of childhood trauma and get the Freedom and peace of mind — Reading God Save the Children by Morrison [J]. *Contemporary Foreign Literature* (1): 107-113.(15).2016.