

Discussion on Toni Morrison's Novel "Home" From the Perspective of Deconstruction

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Abstract:

Toni Morrison is the first African American women writer who wins the Nobel Prize for Literature, Home is her tenth novel. Viewing from deconstruction, this thesis makes an attempt to deconstruct the distinct binary opposition between the black and the white, and the identity of the main character Frank in the novel, and to expose that this set of binary opposition is unstable and Frank's identity is fragmented, so as to call on the black to challenge the White Centralism, reflect on their own weakness, find their unique identity in a bid to prove the value of their lives.

Key Words: *Home*, deconstruction, binary opposition between the black and the white, identity

Introduction

Toni Morrison is one of the most brilliant black literature writers in the United States as well as a unique existence in the 20th century American literary circle. She won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993 which had established her status as a master in art. *Home* is her tenth novel. In this book, the main character Frank and Cee grow up in an unhappy family and they want to escape. Frank leaves home and joins army in the North Korean War, but the war has brought him mental trauma. Cee who goes to the city with her husband but only to be abandoned there. Then she is deceived by a white doctor and almost lose her life. The two siblings gradually recover from the trauma and found their ideal home in the end.

Since the publication in May 2012, *Home* has attracted attentions from both readers and critics. Relevant research and papers have also been sprouted. The relevant studies abroad mainly focus on the novel's structure, theme, style and language. The former book critic of Los Angeles Times David L. Ulin(2012) holds the view

“Toni Morrison’s tenth novel is a certain Old Testament-- style, shifting between short stories, typically an italic letter, which is narrated by Frank Money and more extended third-person set pieces.” The editor of The Washington Post's “Book World” Ron Charles(2012) deems that “Toni Morrison’s nine novels typically emphasize women, but in the tenth book *Home*, she explores the problems of masculinity.” The relevant studies at home are not too many and mainly pay close attention to trauma narration, living space for African-American, identity searching and so on. Professor of Nanjing University Wang shouren(2013) explored the reality and possibility of living space for African Americans in 1950s; professor Hao suling(2012) of Zhengzhou University firmly believed that *Home* is a typical representative of new realism.

This thesis makes an attempt to give a detailed analysis from the perspective of deconstruction by deconstructing the binary opposition between the black and the white and the multiple identities of the hero Frank, so as to explain that this set of binary opposition is unstable and Frank’s identity is fragmented, at the same time, to enlighten the black and call on them to find their unique identity, rethink themselves and dare to challenge the White Centralism and achieve self-value.

Morrison and Deconstruction

Toni Morrison has never publicly admitted she is a deconstructionist and her works are generally analyzed from the perspective of African American literary criticism, post-colonial criticism, and feminist criticism. However, if one has a close reading, it’s not hard to find that Morrison has put the consciousness of deconstruction into her works, whether in *Paradise*, *The bluest eye*, *Beloved* or *Song of Solomon*.

“*Paradise* exposes the construction of binary oppositions between male and female, the white and the black, the light black and the dark black, so as to deconstruct these kinds of binary oppositions, which discusses Morrison’s revelation on racist construction and explores the future of the black.(Zhao, 2011, p115)” In the book *The Bluest Eye*, “two sets of binary oppositions are presented: one set establishes between the white and the black; the other between past and present. Viewing from the point of deconstruction, such binary opposition is unstable due to the weakness of black culture. Blaming white racists also alerts the black themselves.(Li, 2016)” In *Beloved*, Morrison deliberately employs the polarized language of white racists to expose the absurdity that exists between the oppressor and the oppressed. Using polarized language decomposes the discourse hegemony of the white. In *Song of Solomon*, character Milkman’s retrospection of his ancestors challenges and subverts the authority of western discourse.”

Deconstruction demonstrated in Morrison’s novel includes challenges and overturns to the white people’s discourse which carried by power and culture. This type of discourse has erased the subject consciousness of the black, silenced their voices and consolidated the ruling position of the white. In addition, Morrison despises the normal pattern of structuralism as it exerts the ideology of the ruling class to the ruler and the ruled, the black and white, the civilized and the barbarians and other types of parallel relations so as to safeguard the rulers’ dominant position. Thus, Morrison’s style of narration shakes this hollow binary opposition and exposes limitations of ideology. Western logocentrism endows the white culture with a sense of superiority and privilege. Morrison’s novels, from both format and content, deconstruct this point, reflect black and white culture and awake the unique identity of the black.

Constructing and Deconstructing the Binary Opposition Between the Black and the White

Just as Morrison's other nine novels, *Home* also exposes the most distinct binary opposition--the black and the white. However, viewing from deconstruction, it can be seen that this set of binary opposition is unstable due to its internal conflicts and able to be deconstructed. Through background of the novel, the black's physical and psychological security issue and financial situation, the author makes an attempt to analyze how this set of binary opposition be constructed in the first part. And in the second part, the author will prove that the instability of the binary opposition comes from both challenges to the White Centralism and weakness of the black, so as to deconstruct this set of binary opposition.

1. Constructing the binary opposition between the black and the white

Structuralists hold the idea that "we tend to conceptualize our experience in terms of binary oppositions, we understand the word good by contrasting it with the word evil. Similarly, we understand reason as the opposite of emotion, masculine as the opposite of feminine, civilized as the opposite of primitive, and so on. (Tyson, 2006, p254)" In *Home*, white and black is the most distinct binary opposition and it is constructed through three aspects, respectively, background, the black's physical and psychological security issue as well as financial situation.

(1) Background

Morrison sets the background of the story in *Home* in the 1950s, which was an age of rampant racial prejudice of antagonism between the black and the white. In 1954, the Brown v. Board of Education case created a public stir in the United States; in 1955, Rosa Parks was arrested when she refused to give up her seat to a white man on a bus, which triggered off a bus boycott that lasted for 381 days. At that time, Toni Morrison had just started college in Washington DC, where they still had those signs in the buses. "Coloureds only" and so on. She had seen footage of some white mothers in the south trying to turn over a school bus with black children in it. On the news :

"I didn't know if I could turn over a bus full of little white kids. I didn't know if I could feel that... fury. And I tried very hard to. This is what I did: I said suppose... horses began to speak. And began to demand their rights. Now, I've ridden horses. They're very good workers. They're very good racehorses. Suppose they just... want more. Suppose they want to go to school! Suppose they want to sit next to me in the theatre. I began to feel this sense of - 'I like you, but...'; 'You're good, but...' Suppose they want to sleep with my children?!(Brookes, 2012)"

It can be seen that in American, the binary opposition between the black and the white is rampant in 1950s, and the white men even never treat the black men as human beings. At that time, Morrison began to realize how severe the racial problem is in American. Therefore, she sets the 1950s as the time line for *Home*, providing the actual background support for the construction of the binary opposition between the black and the white.

(2) The black's physical and psychological security issue

The novel demonstrates the various aspects of the life of African Americans. Whether on the Korean battlefield, or inside the nation, African Americans all suffered from threatens on their physical and psychological security as a result of the black and white antagonism.

After coming back from the Korean battlefield, Frank suffers from the torture of mental trauma to a great extent : “An integrated army is integrated misery.” Except facing the cruelty of war, he has to face the racial prejudice coming from white people in an integrated army of both black and white, which damages his body and mental health at the same time. During the process that Frank journeys south, racial prejudice and the binary opposition between the black and the white exists everywhere: when a black passenger wants to buy a cup of coffee during the stop at a platform, he is kicked out of the door by the storekeeper and customers and severely beaten up by them. His wife comes to help, but is also injured by a rock. After the two go back on the train, the crowd outside still keep the yelling; during the first conversation with a black laborer Billy, it is known that butchers always throw hog guts, pig’s feet, necks and all offal out or give to the black which white men will never eat; Billy’s 8-year-old son’s arm is shot by white cops just because he plays cap pistol on the sidewalk. His wife is crazy in the emergency room, but they throw her out twice; what’s worse, Frank’s sister Cee nearly loses her life as a white doctor’s experimental tool. It can be seen from those examples that the racialism is severe, and the binary opposition between the black and the white is distinct.

(3)The black’s financial situation

In *Home*, the black men are on or below the poverty line. They live at the bottom of the society, do menial jobs shunned by the white men, get the slender income, and are excluded by the white. What is irony, Frank is poor but his family is Money; the black men Billy works in a steel factory and joins the line at the agency to see if there is any daywork he can take to make more money; Frank’s sister Cee works in a restaurant at first, and even have trouble to buy girl’s necessities, so she has to find a second job or a better one; Frank’s parents, Luther and Ida, works two jobs each-- Ida picking cotton or working other crops in the day and sweeping lumber shacks in the evening. Luther and Uncle Frank are field-workers for two planters and very happy to have the jobs other men had abandoned; Frank’s girlfriend Lily works very hard, lives frugally and finally saves enough money to put a down payment on a house, but only to be told that “ No part of said property hereby conveyed shall ever be used or occupied by any Ethiopian.” This rule undoubtedly revealed racial discrimination and the binary opposition between the black and the white.

2. Deconstructing the binary opposition between the black and the white

“Derrida notes that binary oppositions are hierarchies. One term in the set is always privileged, or considered superior to the other. Therefore, by finding the binary oppositions at work and by identifying which member of the opposition is privileged, one can discover something about the ideology promoted by the production.(Tyson, 2006, p254)” However, binary oppositions are unstable, the two members of the opposition are not completely opposite, thus the limitations of the ideology can be discovered. In *Home*, the binary opposition--the black and the white is constructed to uncover the ideology that African American suffered from racial discrimination which imposed by white men. However, this set of binary opposition is unstable, for white and black are not completely opposite in this novel, thus the promoting ideology has its limitations. In the next part, the author makes an attempt to analyze that this set of binary opposition deconstruct itself through two conflicts: the challenges to the White Centralism and the weakness of the black.

(1) Challenges to the White Centralism

White culture and value system have endowed by Western Logocentrism with a sense of superiority and entitlement. Logocentrism emphasizes the interpretation of the world based on one conception. Therefore, the white men are in possession of a specific discourse, which contains a power structure designated by the signifier and the signified. It strictly draws a line between the oppressor and the oppressed, the black and the white, as well as the ruler and the ruled. For deconstruction, there is no center to our understanding of existence, instead, an infinite number of vantage points from which to view it, and each of these vantage points has its own discourse. "Derrida advocates to decenter Logocentrism just as Copernicus decentered the earth in the 1600s by asserting that the universe does not revolve around it. (Tyson, 2006, p256)" This novel contains the idea of challenging the White Centralism, so as to prove the instability of the binary opposition between the black and the white which can be deconstructed. Here are some examples:

After Frank gets out of the hospital, he finds Reverend Locke. After learning about his tragic condition, Locke and his wife not only provide Frank with the food, shoes, money and other life necessities, but also encourage him to fight for himself: "An integrated army is integrated misery. You all go fight, come back, they treat you like dogs. Change that. They treat dogs better." Reverend Locke wants to use this to call upon Frank to fight against racism, reconstruct his subjective consciousness and walk out of the shadow.

The doctor assistant, Sarah, who writes to Frank and informs him to come to rescue his sister, assists Frank in rescuing Cee at the risk of losing her job. She is finally reproached by Doctor Beaugard Scott. Without permission, Sarah hastily challenges the central status of the white doctor, and the fact that who she rescues is a black women even more challenges his racist conceptions (Doctor Beaugard is a heavyweight Confederate, who has books such as *The Passing of the Great Race*, and *Heredity, Race and Society* on his bookshelf, which advocates his racist thoughts.)

In the novel, the behaviors of common white men also subvert the binary opposition between black and white in the traditional sense. After meeting a robbery in Atlanta, a man holds out his hand to help Frank and gives him a couple of dollar bills. There is no obvious pointing out of the skin color of this person, but it is extremely possible that he is a kind-hearted white man. This is because what comes into his mind first is to call the cops, which a lot of black men would never do since they are afraid to come into contact with police. Those examples prove that the binary opposition between the white and the black in the novel is unstable, the white-centralism is challenged by both the black men and the white men.

(2) Weakness of the black

In the analysis of Home, all critics have readily seen the ideology revealed by the binary opposition between the black and the white, and therefore criticizes the White Centralism and hegemonism. However, such an ideology also has its own limitations, since at the same time of showing sympathy for the tragic experiences of black men, it fails to notice that black people's experience also has a lot to do with their own weakness. From the perspective of deconstruction, so the binary opposition--the black and the white exists unstable and it can be deconstructed by the black people's weakness. One of the typical weakness is the lack of education, which is most obvious on Frank's sister Cee. Like other black kids in Lotus, Cee has been raised in a free style since she was young. When she is fourteen, an age at which she is supposed to be in school, her feelings are cheated by Prince. In her conversation with Mrs. Scott later, we can find out that she did not even

finish high school. When Mrs. Scott mentions Frankenstein, she even has no idea who he is. Cee could have rejected this job, since there are many traces indicating that Doctor Beauregard Scott is a racist. The first instance can be found in his conversation with Sarah, the doctor's assistant, in which Sarah mentions that Doctor Beauregard is a firm supporter of the Confederate Army; the second evidence can be found in the two books on Doctor Beauregard Scott's bookshelf: *The Passing of the Great Race*, and *Heredity, Race and Society*, two books Cee does not even know that are books advocating racism. She even thinks the education she receives at school is too narrow and useless, and she has to find some time to read works on "eugenics", and figure out the definition of this word. Thus it can be said that the tragedy of Cee is caused by her own ignorance to a great extent.

In 1950s, the lack of education is a common problem among African Americans. The racial segregation system practiced at school concentrates all the first-class educational resources in the hands of the white schools. The black schools are not appreciated at all, and therefore, the level of education of black people is not as good as white people. And racial segregation was not abolished until the *Brown v. Board of Education* case. The structure of the binary opposition between the black and the white in the novel is deconstructed by the weakness of the blacks themselves, and Morrison advocates that at the same time of finding fault with racism, the drawbacks of black men themselves should also be reflected upon in order to raise the overall degree of education of black people. Thus, *Home* is also a book that serves as a reminder for the blacks, blaming white racists also alerts the black themselves.

Deconstructing Frank's identity

For deconstruction, "that our experience of ourselves and our world is produced by language we speak, and because all language is an unstable and ambiguous force-field of ideologies, so we ourselves are unstable and ambiguous force-fields of competing ideologies. We don't really have an fixed identity because the word identity implies we consist of one, singular self, but in fact we are multiple and fragmented, consisting of any moment of any number of conflicting beliefs, desires, fears, anxieties and intentions.(Tyson, 2006, p257)" In *Home*, Frank's identity is fragmented, which can be deconstructed into the following three: the homeless, the psychopath and the real man.

Homeless: Frank leads a wondering life in various cities without knowing where he belongs to. The rootless state results in the dissolution and fragmentation of his identity. His family are forced to leave hometown for grandmother in the town of Lotus, where lives are so hard. As a result, Frank chooses to go to the Korean War Battlefields. After undergoing ups and downs both in the hometown and battlefield, Frank gradually became personality disintegrated. After returning from the battlefield, Frank tried to make a living in northern America, but went all the way South after receiving the help letter from Sarah telling his sister Cee's life is at death's door. Frank's life can be described to be displaced and he is a homeless.

Psychopath: The cruelty of the Korean War and the racial discrimination of integrated army has been Frank's lingering nightmare: the grief of losing two friends of the hometown, the shame of shooting a North Korean girl and the cruelty of having witnessed the flesh and blood everywhere in the battlefield tortured his spirit all the time. After coming back to America, he had illusions frequently and end up in a mental hospital eventually.

Real man: Frank has been endured the torture in a psychiatric ward until he receives a help letter from Sarah telling his sister Cee's life is in danger, which makes him regain the courage and the faith to survival. Frank then go to the South to rescue his dying sister Cee. The process of finding himself in the hometown makes him feel like a real man. After saving Cee successfully, Frank finds the long lost direction of life. In Lotus, he finally feel his hometown so beautiful: "It was so bright, brighter than he remembered."

Frank's three identities coexist in geographic, social and psychological spaces, among which the strongest one can becomes the dominant. When first coming back from the Korean Battlefield, the identity of being a "psychopath" led his life, which made him suffer endless pain. In the process of rescuing his sister, the identity of a "real man" gradually rose as his major personality with the spirit brought to a new level and the identity of being a black people recognized. Therefore, the author, by deconstructing Frank's identity and personality, shows that the black people should find their own unique identity, so that the self-value can be realized.

Conclusion

Home by Toni Morrison is a great novel of African American Literature. Readers can appreciate it from different perspectives. This thesis, based on deconstruction, firstly exposes that the most distinct binary opposition--the white and the black is unstable and can be deconstructed so as to call on the black to challenge the white centralism and reflect on their own weakness. Secondly, it explained that the main character Frank's identity is fragmented and can be deconstructed as well in order to appeal to the black to find their own unique identity and to realize their self-value.

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