

# A Study on the Writing Strategies of Ethnic History in Toni Morrison's Novels

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**Abstract:** Since entering the literary world in the early 1960s, Toni Morrison, a black woman writer who has been writing tirelessly for decades, is undoubtedly one of the outstanding minority writers. She uses imaginative and poetic language, as well as highly experimental writing techniques, to depict the lives of black Americans, especially black women, and organically combines the representation of black culture with the construction of black racial subjectivity in her creations. These conscious creative practices have made an undeniable contribution to her own and her ethnic group's struggle for social status and discourse power, as well as to the construction of subjectivity. At the same time, her cognition of her ethnic minority identity and female identity is also reflected in the fictional text through various writing techniques. For these reasons, she was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993. She was the eighth woman to receive this honour since the Nobel Prize in Literature was established in 1901, and the first black American writer of the ten winners. Through close reading and literature review, this paper uses feminist narratology, metafiction and spatial research theories to study the strategies and effects of writing ethnic history in Toni Morrison's novels, in order to explore the motivation of minority women's writing and to predict the new direction of minority women's writing.

**Keywords:** Toni Morrison, Ethnic Minorities, Historical Writing, Metafiction

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## 1. Introduction

The traditional view of history holds that authenticity is the essence of history, so that historical texts and fictional novels have become two completely different writing practices. Literary criticism based on the traditional historical view has a fixed paradigm, that is, starting from the study of the life of the novel author, exploring the relevant political and social background when the author created the work. Literary criticism based on the traditional historical view has a set of fixed paradigm, and analyzing the implicit ideology in the work that conforms to the school of literary criticism. This critical paradigm of traditional history actually implies two presuppositions, that is, the history involved in literary works is absolutely true, and the interpretation of historical texts is objective enough or in line with the ideology advocated by the authorities. However, since the 1960s, the postmodern trend of thought has swept the world, and the historians have begun to discuss the relationship between history and literature. [1] In the 1960s, with the development

of postmodernism, historiography began to turn from traditional historiography to postmodernist historiography, and new historiography belongs to the category of postmodernism historiography, so a new method of literary criticism, new historiography, has emerged. [2]

## 2. The Concept of New Historicism, Minority Novel and Metafiction

### 2.1. The Relationship Between New Historicism and Minority Novels

New historicism emphasizes the interpretation of literature and culture in a politicized way, focuses on the historical context of cultural generation, deconstructs orthodox scholarship in a marginal and subversive way, questions the existing political and social order, and finally turns the historicization of text into the textualization of history, and political criticism into the politics of criticism. [3] New historicism is a "research perspective" that reinterprets

historical texts. [4] Many writers have begun to use the theory of New Historicism as a guide for their literary creations.

The purpose of minority novels is mostly to give voice to ethnic minority groups, so the novel creation of ethnic minority writers cannot show a tendency to exclude the involvement of history in literary works like the modernist literary works. On the contrary, the novel creation of ethnic minority writers actively involves history in their works, but the ideology of these historical events is often contrary to the mainstream. [5] Therefore, the historical events in the creation of such novels with historical archetypes are often not noticed by most people and not reported by the authorities, or are interpreted by the authorities with official ideology for the purpose of maintaining the authority of the ruling class. These historical events are often associated with marginalized groups such as ethnic minorities and are fraught with stigmatization or prejudice against ethnic minorities. Therefore, the concept of history adopted by ethnic minority writers in the creation of racial history novels coincides with the new historical concept of history. Ethnic minority writers will historicize literature and adopt the strategy of "subverting the grand narrative" in the historical writing of novels. [6]

## 2.2. Proposing the Concept of Metafiction

Theorists such as Linda Hutcheon named these novels that interpret or re-interpret historical events supported by the concept of new historicism as "Historiographic Metafiction". Linda Hutcheon, in her book, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, describes a genre of fiction as follows: "It refers to popular fiction that is well known and has a distinctly self-reflective character while paradoxically claiming to have real historical events and characters. The common characteristic of these meta-fiction is that they all believe that history and fiction are artificial creations, thus laying the foundation for the authors to re-narrate the form and content of the past. Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise*, all fall under the category of Historiographic Metafiction.

# 3. Toni Morrison's Ethnic History Writing Strategy

## 3.1. Revealing the Concealed Race History

Toni Morrison's middle period works *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise* all delve into the deep-rooted issue of racial discrimination in the United States. Although her feminist consciousness is also reflected in these three works, feminism is hidden in the depiction of black history and racial discrimination events. Therefore, during this period, Toni Morrison's works mainly show readers the persecution and discrimination of the entire black community in American society. Guided by postmodern historical concepts and metafiction writing practices, Toni Morrison chooses to

integrate real historical events related to black people that have been buried, hidden or deliberately distorted in official history. *Beloved* is based on the true case of the infanticide of Margaret Garner, which shocked the United States during the Atlantic slave trade. Seth, a black female slave persecuted by whites in Toni Morrison's novel, strangled her own daughter, who was less than two years old, while trying to escape to freedom. Her reasoning was that she would rather see her child die than be a slave from the day she was born. Toni Morrison chose this incident because she was fed up with the white media's distorted coverage of this human tragedy. In her view, the root cause of this tragedy is not the cruel and ignorant nature of black people, but the cruel and inhuman physical and mental persecution of black slaves by white slave owners. In order to achieve the purpose of rewriting the historical event, Toni Morrison attempts to reinterpret this real historical event from the point of view of the black community.

## 3.2. Breaking the Boundary Between Truth and Fiction

In *Beloved*, *Jazz*, *Paradise* and other works, Toni Morrison breaks the line between truth and fiction to establish a real connection between history and fiction.

*Beloved* embodies Toni Morrison's new historicist perspective on history, and the story takes place during the slave trade period. However, Morrison does not focus on the usual black literary theme: the brutality and abuse of black slaves by white slave owners. Instead, she has chosen a case of human violence within the black community that took place during the slave trade. Margaret Garner, the perpetrator of this human tragedy, slit her daughter's throat with her own hands while trying to escape from the plantation. This tragic case was widely reported and publicized by whites and became one of the examples of the "black animal" characteristics of blacks in the stereotype of the black community.

### 3.2.1. Disorganized Self-Statement of "Her"

Toni Morrison uses the narrative strategy of meta-fiction to cut, change, weave and expand this historical event that has already been concluded, so as to enter the deep history and subvert history from the inside. She first enriches the flat character of the story, the black murderer, with literary language, adding large psychological descriptions and monologues, such as Seth's monologue at the beginning of Part 2: "Beloved, she's my daughter, she's mine, she's come back to me willingly, and I don't have to explain anything, I didn't have time to explain it before, because it had to be decided, decided." [7] In this monologue, Morrison uses short, repetitive English phrases to convey Seth's bewildered thoughts and mixed feelings of fear and guilt over his daughter's return.

These monologues and psychological descriptions are sometimes disjointed or convoluted, but the insertion of this rich mental monologue helps to establish female subjectivity. Because in news reports, female black slave killers are the "other" to be stared at, the object of observation. The real reason for the infanticide of Margaret Garner, known as Seth

in *Beloved*, is not revealed in the reports, because those in power deliberately ignore or distort factors that work against their rule. The more the real reasons for the tragedy are ignored or distorted, the more the inhuman nature of the tragedy will be reflected, so that these distorted reports cater to the "black animal" white gaze, and further aggravate the deep-rooted racial discrimination in the United States. Morrison used rich and emotional literary language and reasonable imagination to enrich Seth's mental journey before infanticide, describing her spiritual oppression and control by her white master, and accusing slavery of physical destruction and sexual exploitation of black slaves. Based on this, the reader is able to empathize with Seth's killing of her daughter.

### 3.2.2. Different Narratives

Narrators with different identities in *Beloved* often describe the same event in very different ways. For example, the narrative of the central event of 'Seth's infanticide' is completed by filling in, reversing and bridging the memories of several people. Overturning, and bridging the memories of multiple people. Toni Morrison does not choose the traditional linear narrative method of historical fiction in *Beloved*, but instead cuts the time of the story into pieces and disrupts the order of the storytelling. In this way, the continuity of historical development is cut off, and a different narrator's retelling of the episode is inserted at the cross section of each episode. However, because of their different identities and positions, these narrators are often unable to see the whole picture of the event, and the reader will piece together the whole picture of the event through their narratives, while Morrison does not comment on the views expressed by these different narrators, but simply watches and lets the plot unfold.

The first to tell the story were four men on horseback, including "the schoolteacher" who were white slave owners, and because of their unequal relationship with the black community, their narrative of the infanticide implied discrimination against slaves. [8] The reader would have guessed that Seth had killed her children, given the cryptic description of the incident in the previous article, but the chilling message is conveyed directly through the description of the white slave owner. Then it is followed by an old black man Stamp's narration of the incident. Under his narration, the image of Seth transits from an animal to a human. [9] In this part, Stamp and the schoolteachers, although telling the same story, gave different psychological clues to the readers, which made the readers think about the reason why a mother who loves her children could do such a cruel act. At this point, all that is needed is an explanation from the Party. Under pressure from Paul D, Seth, who had always been silent about the tragedy, had to recall the details of the incident. Even in this case, Seth still wanted to hide the incident. She clearly remembered the scent of plants and other irrelevant details on the escape road, but she didn't mention the key details of the infanticide case, she just said lightly, "I stopped him and took my baby to a safe place"

[10].

This method of narration by people of different races, genders and positions is a counteraction to the historical narration of traditional white subjects, which is conducive to the collapse of the authority of the narrative and the highlighting of black women's subjectivity. [11] And the combination of this multi-perspective narrative technique with Toni Morrison's way of deconstructing the grand narrative in the previous article constitutes her new historicist narrative strategy.

### 3.3. Imagination of the Ultimate Way out for Racial Development

Returning to black culture and finding black cultural memories is a method advocated by Toni Morrison to construct the subjectivity of the black race. [12] This is reflected in her later works such as *Song of Solomon*, *Home*, and *tar baby*.

#### 3.3.1. Folk Mythology - Black People Can Fly

In the second part of *Song of Solomon*, Milkman's journey south is actually his journey to find his roots. When describing Milkman's life in the southern United States, Toni Morrison interweaves many myths and folk stories of black culture, such as the folklore of "black people can fly." [13] In fact, this legend appeared at the beginning of *Song of Solomon*. Toni Morrison used magical realism language to depict the suicidal leap of black people from high altitude as flying. She wanted to express the optimistic attitude of black people towards life and the state of facing death calmly, while also revealing the isolation and oppression of black people in American society.

In the second part, milkman's experience of going south to find his roots, the folklore that black people can fly frequently appears. Macon Dead gained a lot of wealth through "fly", but it also caused relatives to fall out and husband and wife to fall apart. He deviated from the black nation and lost the black tradition. His "fly" cut off the root of the black nation and was a ceremony of his own alienation, symbolizing the degradation and decay of the spirit and becoming a deviator from the black culture. Pilot's "fly", however, has a very different meaning from Macon Dead's flight. Pilot is a person who can still maintain the black cultural tradition in the development of modern society. She opposes the misdeeds of her brother, sincerely loves her relatives and friends, and can resolve the conflicts of her family with incredible strength. She is Ruth's guardian and a guide in Milkman's growth process, as her name "pilot" implies. Her fly is a ritual of returning to black national culture, a way to purify the soul and cleanse the original sin, while Milkman's fly better reflects Toni Morrison's efforts to construct black national subjectivity in literature. Milkman's fly takes place at the end of *Song of Solomon*. At that time, Milkman experienced the confusion of going south, overcame the conflict between the values of the white bourgeoisie he had believed in and the simple life of black people for thirty years during his upbringing, and overcame

his irresponsible nature. In the process of eating and living with his southern compatriots, he accepted, recognized, and understood black culture from the bottom of his heart. Beyond the spiritual dilemma of "black people losing their subjectivity and having to imitate and learn from the lifestyle of white people." [14] At the end, Milkman's leap symbolizes his liberation from the constraints of mainstream white culture, joining the ranks of his ancestors, and spiritually returning to national culture, achieving spiritual liberation.

### 3.3.2. Place of Memory -- "Lincoln's Paradise"

If Toni Morrison tries to construct the consciousness of racial subject by finding the root of black culture, then the place of remembrance she creates *Song of Solomon*, "Lincoln's Paradise", is undoubtedly a model of black culture. "Lincoln's Paradise" is named after Abraham Lincoln, the 16th President of the United States and a leader of the black abolitionist movement. It was first mentioned in Milkman's first meeting with Pilot when he cryptically revealed that his father had been shot by a white man. [15] "Lincoln's Paradise" later appeared in the memory of his father, Macon Dead II, who recalled "Lincoln's Paradise" as a space with many animals. It covers an area of one hundred and fifty acres, with natural environments-rivers, forests, and valleys. as well as man-made creatures such as crops, houses, barns, and pigpens, and of course, living things such as pheasants, pigs, cows, and their families. In addition, "Lincoln Paradise" is surrounded by woods and valleys, these natural barriers make "Lincoln Paradise" an isolated, self-contained and independent space. [16]

"Lincoln's paradise" is a composite of multiple space with both natural and artificial properties. These natural objects and artifacts provide the means of production for the three men and meet the survival needs of the three people.

The natural attributes of "Lincoln's paradise" are also in line with the natural views of black people, and the artifacts in it reflect the characteristics of black farming and animal husbandry. The clear division of labor and mutual assistance among father and daughter also reflects the spirit of simplicity, nature, and contentment of black people. Lincoln Paradise is a microcosm of black culture.

"Lincoln's paradise" is also a collective spiritual space for black people. It is the birthplace of the Pilot, the birthplace of Macon Dead II, and the place where the elder Macon Dead died, and it carries different memories of the father and daughter, such as sadness, happiness, anger and fear. In his book "Religious and Cultural Memories", Jan Assmann points out that "by recalling its own history and modernizing the image of memories that serve as a basis for consolidation, the group confirms its identity"[17]. When recalling the scene of himself working hard with his father, Old Macon Dead, and sister Pilot in "Lincoln's paradise", Macon Dead II went against his usual authoritarian and cold tone, His attitude became unprecedentedly peaceful. This indicates that although Macon Dead II became a cold-blooded, skeptical, and white-valued black person after witnessing his father's murder, he also regained the collective unconsciousness of

black culture hidden deep in his heart by recalling the Lincoln Paradise in the "Black Space" by recalling his hard work and shared joys and sorrows with his family in the "Lincoln's paradise". The identity of Macon Dead II as an African American has also been temporarily restored. It can be seen that "Lincoln's paradise" is the spiritual home and cultural sanctuary of black communities. his is the "existential space" proposed by Norbert Schultz, [18] an existential space being a relatively stable perceptual diagram system that precipitates in the depths of consciousness and is a space that people are very familiar with and pour their emotions into. However, "Lincoln's paradise" cannot be completely isolated from the outside world, because as soon as the outside world establishes a connection with "Lincoln's paradise", However, "Lincoln's paradise" cannot be completely isolated from the outside world, because once the outside world establishes a connection with "Lincoln's paradise", it is the time of its destruction. The destruction of "Lincoln's paradise" is a metaphor for the loss of black subjectivity. Toni Morrison's portrayal of "Lincoln's paradise" as a lost paradise serves as a warning to the black people that if black culture is not properly preserved and inherited, and the roots of black culture are not preserved, black culture will find it difficult to escape the fate of assimilation, conquest, and even destruction when faced with the dominant white culture of the American continent.

## 4. Conclusion

Since the beginning of the 21st century, Toni Morrison's work has undergone new changes. In her 2015 book, *God, Save the Children*, she focused on urgent and universally important social issues such as childhood development and campus violence. In fact, it can be seen that in a series of works she created after 2000, she constantly revised her feminist and racial views, eliminating irrational homophobic revenge, reverse discrimination and other content in her ideas, and moving towards a more stable pacifist ideology. [19] This transformation has historical significance, which means that the creation of minority women writers shows a trend of diversified development. Minority women writers are no longer in a state of aphasia in the literary world, and are gradually breaking away from the stereotype of single creative themes and genres, and moving from personalized writing to socialized writing. However, issues of race and women's status are social issues that can never be avoided, and they are also perennial creative themes for minority women writers. So ethnic minority women need not rush to shed their identity labels and prove to everyone that they have broken away from the fixed themes and paradigms of ethnic writing. Instead, they should think more about how to further enrich and develop ethnic writing practices in this diverse and turbulent society.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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