

Folk Language Writing: A Comparative Study of Moyan and Morrison's Novel

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Abstract

MoYan and Toni Morrison are the representative writers who use folk language to write their novels. This essay tries to analyze their special folk language writing style from the respective of dialect and vernacular, folktales, folk songs and folk myth. By using the folk language, the two writers successfully return to the old tradition of their people by using their unique way of expression to transfer the deep meaning of their culture.

Keywords

Folk language, MoYan, Toni Morrison, national culture.

1. Introduction

The so-called nationality is the fundamental characteristics of a nation, which refers to a nation's unique relatively stable personality, cultural accumulation and psychological structure, and this fundamental characteristic is generally shared by the members of the nation. Any nation in the world, no matter big or small, has different spiritual temperament from other nations. This kind of spiritual temperament is gradually formed in the long process of historical development, and will not easily change in essence. Language system is the foundation of a national culture, a symbol marking the path of national thinking, and the basic carrier and protective film of national culture. William Von Humboldt also proves this idea in his way, "the mental individuality of a people and the shape of its language are so intimately fused with one another, that if one were given, the other would have to be completely derivable from it. For intellectuality and language allow and further only forms that are mutually congenial to one another. Language is, as it were, the outer appearance of the spirit of a people; the language is their spirit and the spirit their language; we can never think of them sufficiently as identical." [1]

2. Dialect and Vernacular

MoYan and Toni Morrison are the representative writers who use folk language to write their novels. As MoYan says, "I think my language is inherited from the folk, and it is in the same line as the oral legend of folk artists. Firstly, the language is exaggerated, fluent and eloquent; Secondly, it is vivid and local." [2] Henry Gates, an African American scholar, also points out this idea in his book *The Signifying Monkey*, "to defeat the prejudice of European center, we should explore the dialect and vernacular of black people". [3] The two writers just write in a way trying their best to adopt the folk forms of expression. In *Sandalwood Death* by MoYan, there is a lot of folk language such as two-part allegorical sayings, proverbs and slangs: "Full water, overflowing; full moon, losing. It's not good to be too happy; dog is too happy to eat shit", "No cross, no crown; No risk, no achieve", "The only son of Grandma has dead, there is no uncle (help)," etc. Dialects and local language are widely used in *Red Sorghum*, such as "a cat nap/cash in my chips", "bad wood", "noon", etc. This kind of language is also very common in Morrison's novels. Morrison emphasizes the oral effect that she tries to capture in her works. She once said

that the colloquialism in the book was intentional. Taking Jazz as an example, there are some slangs such as “Softheaded”, “Could’ve”, “ain’t”. In *Beloved*, you will read countless sentences like “You just gonna feed her? From now on?” The dialect and vernacular of their people originates from their deep emotion of their people and hometown. They believe that the folk language is alive; its primitive wildness breaks free from the bondage of ordinary literary language and has extraordinary appeal.

Mo Yan and Morrison’s novels vividly present the traditional oral forms like storytelling, singing folk songs, echoing, passing down myths and so on. Morrison once comments, “The black community must bear the responsibility of passing down myths, the traits of black ancestors, stories and imagination from generation to generation. From the cultural point of view, these are interrelated, which is the reason why the black people keep their independence and integrity from being melted by the mainstream culture.” [4] Before mastering written language, people mainly depended on oral transmission. This tradition is a precious cultural heritage inherited by people from their ancestors, including folklore, myth, story and folk song handed down from generation to generation. Especially for the black people who had been plundered to America by slave hunters, oral expression not only played a role in daily communication, but also was a means of storing wisdom and a good medicine for their psychological trauma. This form of oral transmission is also considered to be a kind of oral evidence handed down from generation to generation. As Wendy Harding and Jacky Porter Martin put it, “these activities, such as parenting, storytelling and singing, represent more of a practical effort to heal psychological wounds and create a cohesive community.” [5]

3. Folktales

Mo Yan once said, “Now I can remember about 300 stories. These stories can be a good novel with a little modification, but I have written less than 50. I can’t finish these stories in my life. Moreover, the stories I haven’t written are much more wonderful than those I wrote. It’s just like a fruit seller always wants to sell fruit with insect eyes first.” [6] There are mainly four types of folktales in his novels: ghost stories, spirits stories, character stories and legends. Such examples are scattered in most of his novels. There are ghosts haunted in the shady house in *Straw Shoe Workshop*, ghosts in a meat market in *Pow*, and the ghosts of boys, cattles and white bearded old men repeatedly appear in *Our Seventh Uncle*. Many spirits of animals appear in his novel such as the spirit of spider in *Straw Shoe Workshop* and turtle spirit in *Sin*. In *Mangrove*, there are stories of Su Dongpo (Chinese ancient poet) and Hong Xiuquan (Chinese ancient uprising army leader). Legend stories include the story of tiger beard in *Sandalwood Death* and the story of wine moth and peach seed in *The Republic of Wine*. Mo Yan can be called a folk storyteller. He is regarded as an inheritor of folk story cultural heritage. Of course, the achievements of Mo Yan’s novels have far exceeded the artistic level of folk storytellers. He is a novelist with worldwide influence who has absorbed the nutrition of Chinese folk oral literature.

African blacks are good at telling stories. When there is no written language, they spread stories about their ancestors by word of mouth. Before telling the story, they usually hold a grand prayer ceremony, praying for their ancestors to protect them from using words truthfully. It is through these stories handed down from generation to generation that black descendants have strengthened their ties with their ancestors. In the process of listening to stories, children must learn to listen carefully. The ability of oral reporting and listening is the most basic learning method that they need to master in this world, and it is also their survival ability. In the novel, Morrison appeals to the readers to pay attention to the loss of African oral tradition and believes that black descendants have lost the ability of oral reporting and listening. One example is that Milkman lacks in listening ability in the first place. He can’t remember the song

sung by children while playing games in Sharimar. He has to rely on pen and paper to write down the song. Later, in order to know the history of his family, he changes his previous indifference to the things around him and learns to listen carefully to the conversations of those he has listened to but never paid any attention to. Milkman who learns to listen finally learns about his grandfather and his "Lincoln Paradise" farm from his aunt Pilate, the real name of his grandparents from his cousin Susan Bird, the past events about his grandparents, father and aunt from Ceth, a 100 years old man, and more about the family history from his grandfather's old friends in the south. It is because of the regaining of listening ability that Milkman can understand his family history and find his own cultural roots. From the perspective of children's psychology, listening to stories and telling stories are very important for children's growth. Morrison recalls her own growth with this tradition, "Storytelling is an activity they are willing to participate in together. Grandparents, dads, moms, uncles and aunts all joined in the story telling. In such an atmosphere, there is no difference between men and women, but now the difference between men and women has become a fashion. My parents never argue about who should do what. They will face the crisis together." [7] In the novel, the spiritual life of the Dead family is a blank. Apart from eating together and going out to show off, there is no longer any form of family gathering. The parents only talk about their own private affairs; the two daughters make false roses all day long; and the son is busy helping his father collect the tenant's rent. Morrison also reminds readers that the black community has lost the ability to tell the story completely. In *Song of Solomon*, the story is broken up into separate chapters. Because of the different narrators of the story, their perspectives are usually different, so Ruth and Macon have different views on the death of their father, their marital status and the behavior of the other. In another novel *Beloved*, the plot finally forms a whole by telling stories from the story told by Seth to Denver, Seth to *Beloved* and Denver to *Beloved*.

4. Folk Songs

Mo Yan once said, "Folk history and folk culture are not written, but sung, and of course some are spoken out." [8] Folk songs, the rhythm of these folk songs, simple sentences, and rhymes, dotting in the text of the novel, increase the expression of the language, enrich the level of the novel, and deepen the rendering of the text. For example, Xuaner was taken by her uncle to the county to see a doctor because she had been married for three years and had no child. When she rode on a donkey in a field covered with water networks, a song came from afar. She also sang this song when she was a child. The song was like this: "Purple flowers bowls, blue blue wine, Niuniu, follow her son-in-law. Go, go, go, go, go, go. Go into night, sleep in the grass nest. Hug, cuddle, give birth to a litter of puppies next year." The emergence of this ballad further deepens the artistic appeal of the novel here, and it has the picture sense of pushing closer and farther like a film lens. The joy of giving birth to a litter of puppies is a reflection of her sadness that she was rejected by her mother-in-law because she could not have a litter. This folk song is inspired by "Purple flowers bowls, blue blue wine." The lyrics are simple rhymed and catchy. It has a lingering charm of the ancient style of the book of songs. In *Sandalwood Death*, he even directly implants the structure and libretto of "Maoqiang" opera form, and strides back to the traditional Chinese folk art form to seek a breakthrough point in novel writing. Maoqiang's lyrics are completely colloquial, its singing is easy to learn, and its accompaniment instruments are easy to obtain, which is suitable for performing in the field under poor conditions. Maoqiang is an opera of the people in Northeast China, a folk carnival, an open school for the people, and a channel for them to vent their emotions. Mo Yan's introduction of Maoqiang has laid out the narrative clues of the novel with originality, and increased the tension of dramatic contradictions and conflicts in the novel. Each character's libretto gold sentence frequency, suspense heavy, added the reader's reading expectation and pleasure. Undoubtedly, the melody of Maoqiang and the obsession of the whole people's Carnival set off Sun Bing's heroic death,

which shows the desolation of the era of power and sovereignty, and describes the ignorance of the onlookers at that time.

Black people are naturally fond of singing, and singing is an integral part of their lives. Music has obvious psychological healing and calming effects. In *Song of Solomon*, Pilate sings sad folk songs at the funeral of her beloved granddaughter Hagar, in order to pacify the dead and alleviate the suffering of the living. Even the iron-hearted Macon cannot help stopping his pursuit of fame and wealth when he passes by Pilate's humble residence because he hears the songs of their three generations. In *Beloved*, Sethe runs into Amy near the Ohio River, a white girl, on her way to running away from slavery. Sethe is scarred and exhausted with a little baby in her womb. It is Amy's song that the little baby stops kicking, and Sethe forgets her pain. At the end of the novel, Ella leads the black women to sing and pray together, expelling ghosts, saving Sethe's life, and making her bravely step out of self abandonment and self closure and start a new life. Morrison is also lamenting the loss of folk songs. She attributes the loss of folk songs to the influence of political, economic, entertainment trends and fashion elements, and believes that black people no longer had the previous music tradition. Through her novel, she reminds readers not to forget the existence of black folk songs. As she said, "folk music once makes us full of life, but now it's too few." [9] In *Song of Solomon*, only Pilate has a passion for singing. The reason why "Solomon's song" is misrepresented as "sugar man's song" in the novel is because the black folk songs have been changed in the transmission, which is the real reflection of the black original ecological culture distortion under the force of reality situation.

5. Folk Myth

As an original form of human spiritual culture, myth exists in all national cultures. Writers turn their eyes to ancient myths, rituals, dreams and fantasies, "trying to rediscover the hope of curing modern chronic diseases and seek to make up for the incompetence and atrophy of human nature cause by technological domination and rational alienation from the root of rationality out of irrationality and the source of consciousness out of unconsciousness". [10] In the contrast between the virtual and the real, writers seek and construct the cultural significance of human spiritual world.

In *Autumn Water*, Moyan adopts a mode of flood myth which traces back to the origin and establishment of "Gaomi Northeast Village". "My grandfather" and "my grandmother" refers to the two creators just like Noah. A flood lasts for 15 days. Some chosen people flee to this wild land and "my grandmother" gives birth to a baby. New life begins.

In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison combines the flying myth of ancient Greece with the folk songs that black people are good at. In ancient Greek mythology, Daedalus, the Athenian architect, designed and built a maze for Minos, king of Crete. After it was built, the king was worried that Daedalus will tell out the secret of the maze. So Daedalus and his son, Icarus were imprisoned on an island called Crete. In order to escape from the island, the father and son finally came up with a way. They waxed the feathers of the birds to their arms, and then they swing like birds to make their wings fly. The father flew farther and farther away and finally got his freedom, but his son flew closer and closer to the sun because he was immersed in the joy of flying. The wax used to stick feathers on his wings began to melt, and he finally fell into the sea and died. In the novel, Solomon, the ancestor of Milkman, wants to fly back to Africa with his favorite little son Jack in order to escape from slavery. But Jack fell from the sky to the ground during the flight, and finally landed on the land of America. Morrison believes that flying myth is a part of black folk songs and African wisdom which should be carried on by the blacks. But in fact, the black community has not taken on this responsibility. In the novel, few people are interested in the myth of flying. Few people remember the legend, except for the nursery rhymes sung by children playing games, which refer to the myth of Solomon flying. In this context, black culture

has lost its coherence, independence and integrity. Song of Solomon is an important chapter in Bible. It is a poem praising love and is known as the song of songs. However, in Morrison's novel Song of Solomon, this song shows the cruel abandonment of his wife Lena by Milk man's ancestors. Morrison sets off the theme of the protagonist's abandonment of love with the obvious opposition between the two songs in content and emotion, which profoundly and vividly shows the miserable life of African American women.

6. Conclusion

From the perspective of history and culture, people bear the great mission of inheriting their own national culture to a certain extent. Some people, especially the black people, have been deprived of the right to receive education and enjoy culture for a long time, so they cannot express their wishes and feelings in written language. The stories, folk songs, legends and myths take the responsibility of acting as carriers of history and culture that are handed down orally from generation to generation.

Sometimes, because the carrier of this kind of history and culture is relatively simple and primitive, it is inevitable to distort the original nature of the original ecological culture. Compared with the dominant white culture in the United States, the original black culture is undergoing a severe test. To maintain the independence and integrity of the black culture and call for the consciousness of the black national culture have become the consistent theme of Morrison's novels.

In a whole, the two writers successfully return to the old tradition of their people by using their way of expression to transfer the deep meaning of their culture. Their novels are rooted in their strong hometown complex and the life of their hometown which are inseparable from their folk art, folk beliefs and national history.

Acknowledgements

This work is supported by the project of "The Nationality of Literature in the Context of Globalization -- a Comparative Study of Mo Yan and Toni Morrison's Novels" from Excellent Youth Project of Hunan Education Department [Project No.: 17B074]

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