

The Ecosophy and the Religious Source in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Xing Liu^{1*}

¹ School of Foreign Languages, East China Jiaotong University, Nanchang, China

Email Address

xingtracy505@aliyun.com (Xing Liu)

*Correspondence: xingtracy505@aliyun.com

Received: 3 April 2025; Accepted: 30 April 2025; Published: 16 May 2025

Abstract:

Critics have almost unanimously regarded *Beloved* as the finest work of Toni Morrison. So far the interpretations of the novel have covered a wide range of approaches. Some critics tried to stress universality of *Beloved*; while others tried to focus on the racial characteristics of the novel. Since *Beloved* has been left with more print of Africa than Morrison's other novels have, especially that of the African religion, this paper is to explore the representation of the features of the African religion and the ecosophy embedded in *Beloved*. This paper aims at finding out the African religious sources of the thoughts of the characters in *Beloved* and how these religious and philosophical beliefs are represented in the novel. Through a study of the African religion and the text of *Beloved*, the paper testifies that Morrison employs dualism as the most distinguishing feature of the African religion in respect of spiritual beliefs and social principles in *Beloved*.

Keywords:

African Religion, Dualism, *Beloved*, Ecosophy

1. Introduction

Before the entry of foreign religions into Africa, the Africans had a religion that functioned effectively, featuring a system of beliefs as well as practices or rituals. According to Mamaissii Vivian Dansi Hounon [1], the representative of the religion of the African slaves in America is the Vodoun religion rather than Christianity. The Vodoun religion derived from West African Dahomean Vodoun which had been fully developed prior to its arrival in America. The word "Vodoun" is also known as "Vodou", "Vudu", "Vodun" and "Voodoo". According to Hounon, the word "Vodou" in the Fon language simply means spirit, a term used to describe the specialized Nature divinities served in the Vodoun religion. In the Ewe language, Vudu not only describes the divinities of Nature, but the entire philosophical and metaphysical essence of the African's existence and their relationship with the world. Vodoun stressed the warrior gods who sustained and directly aided the Africans in their numerous slave rebellions, and ultimately their freedom from the brutal system of chattel slavery forced upon them. According to Hounon [1], the western acculturation of Christianity did not affect much the lives of the African slaves in America. Thousands of the African slaves still continued to praise God and served their

ancestral divinities. Vodou's meaning and hidden practice by the African diaspora continued to symbolize their active resistance to oppression, as well as a special intimacy with Africa, their ancestors, and the gods that would not leave their blood. The Vodoun religion kept the same features as that of its ancestral religion—the dualistic features of the African religion, which are reflected by the African concept of humanity, God, time and the relationship between individual and community.

2. Dualism and the African Religion

The African slaves in America were practitioners of the various African religions. West Africa is where the majority of slaves departed for the New World. The religious practices of the Africans enslaved in America have their ancestral roots in West Africa. The Vodoun religion can be regarded as the representative of the religion of the African slaves in America which maintained the dualistic features of the African religion.

2.1. Dualism

The term dualism can be defined in three dimensions: theology, philosophy and anthropology. Dualism appears to have been first used by Thomas Hyde in his *De Religione veterum Persarum* (1700) [2]. Hyde used this term in a religious reference. In theology, dualism leads to the dogma of two deities—a good and an evil, as in the old Persian religion. Besides, dualism in theology also refers to the two natures of man: both physical and spiritual. Body is sharply distinguished from soul; and the latter is conceived to be destined to existence in some sort of independence of the former, that is, the two possess separate reality.

Later dualism was used in the field of philosophy. Wolff was the first to use it as applied to the opposition of mind and matter. According to James Mark Baldwin [2], dualism explains the facts of the universe by referring them to the action of two independent and eternally coexistent principles.

Furthermore, the term dualism has much broader sense in anthropology. David Maybury-Lewis and Uri Almagor [3] hold that human beings in each area have dualistic mode of thinking, which will sometimes be reflected in the social structure. The term dualism is used in the last sense in this paper that human beings tend to have dualistic mode of thinking, as this sense is much broader and in agreement with the dualistic features of the African religion.

2.2. The African religion

The African religion is dualistic in terms of the African religious conception of humanity, God, time and the relationship between individual and community. For Africans, all human beings are unique two-natured beings. It is generally believed that at the time of death the primary human qualities separate from the material body which then dies. After death, the good benevolent spirits being the spirits of good and loving people who are now deceased are immortalized, deified and venerated as the benevolent ancestors [4]. At the same time, the spirits of the evil people who are now deceased are feared and ostracized as being malicious evil agents who are referred to as ghosts. Some of these evil spirits, are wandering spirits of some dead persons who due to some lack did not make it to the home of the ancestors.

The dualistic feature of the African concept of time is represented in two aspects: one is that time for the traditional Africans is a two dimensional phenomenon with an

indefinite past and present; the other is that the Africans have two kinds of measure of time: one is either marked by people and value-loaded or meaningful events or is marked by lunar months, seasons, years and generations extending backwards in time [4].

In African theology, there is a chain of intermediaries between to bridge the gulf between holy transcendent God or Cosmic King in heaven and the sinful human beings as his finite subjects on earth [4]. On the top of the African chain of being is God as the transcendent, infinite creative Mystery, followed by spiritual beings such as divinities and the good ancestral spirits (or other good spirits). Human beings follow the spiritual beings. Next are evil spirits; then animals, followed by the plants, then inanimate objects, and finally at the bottom of the hierarchy comes the category of space and time. Through this chain of intermediaries, God intervenes in daily life and human history in order to offer and mediate his grace, power, mercy and protection from evil, misfortunes and untimely death. The traditional African people also knew God personally and collectively through their own revelatory history, God's Word as spoken through the mediums, prophets, elders, kings and the priests.

All the people that ever lived and who are still remembered are considered real social members of the community. The ancestral spirits are part of the living community and act as guardian angels and mediators between the living relatives and their transcendent God in heaven. The family head serves as the mediator, high priest and sacrificial religious leader of the household and the extended family. Therefore within the African family religious context, each major family meal and gathering was a sacred gathering before God.

The dualistic features of the African religion are thus concentrated in two domains. In the spiritual domain, it includes a chain of intermediaries between God and man. In the social domain, it attaches importance to the harmonious relationship between individual and community.

3. The Ecosophy and the Religious Source in *Beloved*

What might be called superstition and magic in the west is, for Morrison and the African-American tradition, just another way of knowing things[5]. This way of knowing things is the ecosophy of survival for the black people in the novel.

3.1. *Ambivalent God's Will*

For the black people, God in *Beloved* is neither Jesus nor the totally benevolent God. He seems to own double features for them. Although the black people do not grant any other name to the cosmic Creator besides the Lord and God, this God, for them, is like the warrior god who can sustain and aid them in their battle against persecution by the white people and struggle for their complete freedom from the brutal system of slavery. The proof can be found in the questions raised to Baby Suggs by Stamp Paid: "You saying the whitefolks won?" "You saying God give up? Nothing left for us but pour out our own blood?" [6]. These words imply that both Baby Suggs and Stamp Paid once had a firm belief in God to lead them to victory in their battle against racial persecution.

The black people did believe in God to lead them to win the battle against racial persecution. However, they felt it difficult to approach God in a direct and convenient way. This problem of inconvenient communication with God prompted them to resort to the intermediaries between God and them such as spirits and time.

3.2. Intermediaries

In *Beloved*, Baby Suggs is a good benevolent ancestor. Living, Baby Suggs showed her love to her family and the neighborhood; being dead, she continued to protect her family and help them go on their life with her spirit. For Denver and Sethe, her spirit still existed and lived around them. When difficulty comes, Sethe would go to the clearing to seek advice and comfort from her husband's dead mother. Similarly, the spirit of Baby Suggs also provided guidance for the growth of Denver. At the moment when Denver hesitated to step out of her house and was at a loss about what to do, she heard Baby Suggs laughing. Denver then held a little conversation with Baby Suggs' spirit. It was her grandma's words that finally made her walk out of her home asking somebody to help her mother: "Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on" [6].

In contrary to the benevolent spirit of Baby Suggs, there are also some malicious spirits in the novel. These spirits, according to African religion, should be feared and ostracized as being malicious evil agents who are referred to as ghosts. The main haunting ghost appeared throughout the novel was the spirit of Sethe's daughter who seemed to be embodied by Beloved later. But the baby's ghost and Beloved made Sethe's family live a miserable life and even tortured Sethe to death. As a result, both the baby's ghost and Beloved were driven out of Sethe's house for the sake of the prosperity and harmony of Sethe's family.

According to Mbiti [7], time for Africans is a two dimensional phenomenon, with a long past, a present and virtually no future. What has not taken place or what has no likelihood of an immediate occurrence falls in the category of "no time" [7]. This was the case when Sethe asked to unbraid Denver's hair, Denver wanted to postpone it until they had "a fine-tooth comb", but Sethe said: "Today is always here"; "Tomorrow, never" [6].

The two measures of time for the Africans were also represented in *Beloved*. Firstly, time is both human and event-centered. That time is human-centered can account for the reason why Sethe is late for work for the first time. When Sethe identified Beloved as her dead daughter coming back, she wanted to devote all her time and love to Beloved to make up for the severest error which she once made in the past. Consequently, she was going to be late for work for the first time in sixteen years. After she got up late, she did not hurry to the restaurant where she worked but made breakfast for her daughters instead. For Sethe, what concerned her most was showing her love to Beloved rather than the set time for work. Time is also event-centered. For instance, Paul D used the reference of an event when he recalled the past. Recalling the story told by Sixo, Paul D thought "that was before he [Sixo] speaking English" [6]. Secondly, time for the Africans is measured by lunar months, seasons, years and generations extending backwards in time. For Sethe, "twenty-eight happy days were followed by eighteen years of disapproval and a solitary life" [6]. Two time markers appear simultaneously in this sentence: lunar month and years.

Belonging to the African "chain of being", time is a real existence in *Beloved*. The past, according to Sethe's understanding, was always there with a permanent presence: "Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on ... It's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else ... it's going to always be there waiting for you" [6]. Sethe considered the past as a physical presence, something that was real. Beloved's arrival confirmed her conception of the past.

Representing the repressed past, Beloved acted as a double-edged sword with both destructive and healing power. In *Beloved*, all the black people were unwilling to tell their past as every mention of their past life hurt. “Everything in it was painful or lost. Sethe and Baby Suggs had agreed without saying so that it was unspeakable” [6]. When Denver asked Sethe about the past, Sethe only gave “short replies or rambling incomplete reveries” [6]. Even when Sethe was with Paul D, “who had shared some of it and to whom she could talk with at least a measure of calm, the hurt was always there” [6]. However, when Beloved approached Sethe with the same name of her dead daughter and inquired her of her past experience, Sethe found herself wanting to, liking it. After Sethe affirmed that Beloved was her dead daughter, Sethe indulged herself in the past and even quit her job, explaining repeatedly to Beloved why she reacted to the schoolteacher in that way. Under the torture and burden of the painful past, Sethe went near the edge of death. Although Beloved’s presence brought great suffering to Sethe and nearly cost her life, she was not all that destructive anyway. Under Beloved’s request, Sethe recovered her memory of her mother and was reminded that her mother spoke a different language which she could understand but could not speak. With Beloved’s inquiry of her motivation for killing her children, Sethe finally obtained a chance to release her repressed emotion, appealing for the African slaves about the dilemma which they had to face and the suffering which they had to endure. Beloved for Sethe was both poison and antidote just as it was Beloved that both choked Sethe and healed the wound in the Clearing.

For Paul D, Beloved exerted similar effects on him, both devastating and healing. On the one hand, Beloved’s overwhelming force destroyed Paul D’s sense of manhood. Paul D did not like Beloved but he was seduced by her. He was made ashamed as if he was “a rag doll—picked up and put back down anywhere any time by a girl young enough to be his daughter” [6]. The helplessness which Paul D felt before Beloved conveyed him the feeling that his manhood had been ruthlessly crushed. On the other hand, Paul D came to confront the past through Beloved. Before Paul D’s encounter with Beloved, Paul D repressed his feelings and his memory of his past and locked them away in his heart as his “tobacco tin” [6]. In order to prevent himself from further emotional loss, Paul D isolated himself from his affections: “So you protected yourself and loved small ... A woman, a child, a brother—a big love like that would split you wide open in Alfred, Georgia” [6]. This repression was a reaction to his traumatized experiences at the prison camp in Alfred, Georgia, through which his manhood had been burst into pieces. By the time Paul D arrived at 124, his tobacco tin had rusted over completely and “nothing in this world could pry it open” [6]. However, staying with Beloved evoked a life hunger in him. His need for her was like the need for air, “the clear air at the top of the sea” [6]. The encounter with Beloved thus gave Paul D life by releasing his repressed feelings and memories.

Likewise, the appearance of Beloved both haunted Denver and catalyzed Denver’s growth. As soon as Beloved arrived at Sethe’s house, Denver decided to protect Beloved from her mother so as not to let her sister leave her once more. However, Denver almost surrendered her selfhood to the sister by devoting all her emotion and time to her without considering her own physical needs. When Beloved disappeared in the cold house, Denver burst into crying “because she has no self. Death is a skipped meal compared to this. She can feel her thickness thinning, dissolving into nothing” [6]. It was not until Sethe spit up something she had not eaten that Denver thought it necessary to protect her mother from Beloved. Denver realized the destructive power of the past when she sensed that Beloved lapped Sethe’s devotion

“like cream” [6]. Consequently, Denver regarded it her responsibility to step off the edge of the world of the past to ask somebody for help. This step marked the ending of Denver’s isolation from the world and the beginning of her integration into the community. With this step, Denver gathered up her courage to confront the past and began to develop an independent personality. Later in her conversation with Paul D, when Paul D was going to put forward his opinion, Denver declined it and said that she had her own. Paradoxically, the confrontation with Beloved first brought detriment to the psychological growth of Denver but later stimulated the development of Denver’s independence.

3.3. Universality of Beloved

Set in slavery and its aftermath, *Beloved* also relates to racism which according to Morrison is a universal problem. In a strict sense, *Beloved* is dedicated to the sixty million black people who died as a result of slavery. Half of them died in the slave ships departed from Africa [8]. They were the discriminated race. Although people are not slaves by birth, racism is institutionalized. In Angelo’s interview with Toni Morrison, Morrison refers to racism as a phenomenon which is present all over the world rather than limited only in America or in the period of slavery [8].

In the novel *Beloved*, Beloved as a character can be either the embodied spirit of Sethe’s daughter or a survivor of the slave ship. Nevertheless, the quotation on the title page of the novel enlarges the meaning of Beloved, which emphasizes the salvation given by God to those gentiles. Hence Beloved in the quotation can refer to the discriminated races of human society.

As the meaning of Beloved enlarges, the references of individual and community are broadened respectively. Beloved in the quotation refers to those people who are discriminated against by the human society. If human population can be regarded as a community consisting of different races, these races are the individuals within the community of human beings. In *Beloved*, the black people can survive only by maintaining the harmonious relationship between individual and community. Likewise, the quotation on the title page indicates that people should keep harmony in the global society regardless of racial differences. The black people in the novel set a good example by establishing a harmonious relationship with Edward Bodwin.

3.4. Inner Balance

In addition to the broadening of the dualism in the external world, Morrison also extends the employment of dualism to the internal world. According to Wilfred D. Samuels and Clenora Hudson-Weems [9], what concerns Morrison in *Beloved*, however, is not what history has recorded in the slave narratives but what it has omitted. They also hold that the omitted part in the slave narratives for Morrison is the interior life of the black people which she explores in *Beloved*. The novel elaborates this interior life as the inner struggle of the black people, especially that of black women.

Due to the pernicious effect of slavery, the black people in the novel often felt debased and were reluctant to love themselves. Sethe almost surrendered herself to her children and regarded them as her best part. According to Sethe, “That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn’t like yourself anymore” [6]. Thus she considered her children as her best part and tried to protect this part from

being dirtied by slavery: “Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them” [6]. By claiming her children as her best part, Sethe denied her own selfhood simultaneously. As a survivor of the slave ship, Beloved suffered the humiliation on the ship which made her want to separate from her body: “we are all trying to leave our bodies behind” [6]. As for Paul D, he distanced himself from his feelings. When the schoolteacher put a bit in his mouth, he felt that his manhood had been totally trampled and that there was no way to be Paul D again. In order to preserve himself from further psychological damage, he alienated himself from his emotions and loved small. In *Beloved*, nearly all the black people had experienced similar inner struggle under the brutal system of slavery.

Although Denver had escaped the chance of being a slave, she also experienced inner struggle as a result of Sethe’s improper way of nurturing. She did not recognize her independent selfhood until Nelson Lord informed her. Before that, she attached her selfhood either to her mother or to her sister.

Despite the painful experiences of the inner struggle of the black people, they still challenged themselves to achieve inner peace with the help of others. With regard to the stories of Sethe and Paul D, the past was too painful for either to remember alone can be recovered together [10]. Sethe and Paul D finally made it possible to obtain inner peace with mutual support. One sign was Paul D’s will to put his story next to Sethe’s. Nelson Lord evoked Denver’s consciousness to develop an independent selfhood. With the help of the neighborhood, Denver finally succeeded in becoming an independent girl who no longer attached her selfhood to her mother or sister. Although each character has a “split sense of self”, “each of them by the story’s end attains an integrity of spirit in acknowledging the emotional continuities that bridge the abyss of experience” [11].

As a matter of fact, the problem of inner struggle is not necessarily confined to the context of slavery. The same problem does exist in the modern society. In the view of Marsha Darling [12], although the women characters in the novel talk to us from the nineteenth century, Morrison is obviously saying things about the here and now and about women here and now. In modern society, the problem can be the tension between being oneself and playing other roles, such as a mother or a lover. Slavery for Morrison seems to present an ideal situation to discuss the problem. With the exploration of the tension between being oneself and being a mother, *Beloved* displays the horrible outcome by surrendering one’s selfhood. As this phenomenon still exists in modern society, *Beloved* in this way reaches beyond the limit of the nineteenth century and gives a warning to the modern people concerning the significance of the harmony within oneself.

4. Conclusions

Apart from the application of dualism in the spiritual beliefs and social aspect, *Beloved* broadens and extends the range of the employment of dualism in the external world and the internal world respectively. The story *Beloved* in a broader sense appeals for both world peace and the inner peace within oneself. Not only should human beings achieve the harmony in society, but also should achieve peace in one’s personal life.

The dualism in *Beloved* does not exist for its own sake, however. With the dualistic mode of thinking, the black people in the novel not only acknowledged the existence

of differences but also strived for a way to achieve harmonious coexistence of the differences, which is coincidentally congruent with the ecosophy of diverse and harmonious coexistence raised by Chinese scholars such as He Wei and Liu Jiahuan [13]. In the spiritual domain, the belief in the existence of the chain of being attached an importance to the spiritual harmony through the harmonious interaction of beings. In the social domain, the black people devoted effort to maintain the balance and harmony between individual and community. In personal life, the black people in the novel suffered inner struggle and tried to preserve their life by achieving inner peace. The ultimate goal of the interaction of beings is to achieve peace which is not only social but also spiritual and psychological.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Funding

This work was supported by Humanities and Social Sciences Research Project of Jiangxi's Higher Learning Institutions (Project No.: WGW19202).

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