

# A Comparative Study of Similarities between Morrison and Tie Ning

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## Abstract

The thesis, employing parallel method in comparative literary study and an approach of feminism, conducts a comparison in the light of a lack of feminist consciousness and a hostile outlet of feminist consciousness in *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* by Toni Morrison, an African American author, and *Gate of Roses* by Tie Ning, a Chinese contemporary author, which illustrates that an extreme feminist consciousness does damage to a healthy feminist consciousness.

**Keywords:** comparison, feminism, lack, hostile outlet

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Originality and Creativity of this Paper

Taking an overview of Chinese Morrison criticism, several specific literary theories are often applied in her novel studies. Feminist approach is mostly adopted for Chinese scholars. A lot of scholars employed feminism in exploring the characterization and themes in Morrison's *Sula*. So the problem of feminist studies is univocal in terms of selection of subject. Most of the essays just discussed the African-American women's oppression of both gender and race. The second one is African-American culture. Morrison is highly acclaimed as "an heir to African-American culture and tradition." (Yang, 2011, p. 55) Her novels disclosed the African-American's psychological predicament and recognition of their identity. Chinese scholars show a great enthusiasm about it and devote a large number of researches on the function of African-American tradition and culture in its confronting the white, which don't break the western research confinement. Besides to what is mentioned above, historical and political significance of her novels are also focused on. Chinese scholarship has made many achievements in this field. But some of them only probed into the physical and psychological torture caused by slavery from perspective of history and politics, which seems feeble. In recent years, cultural criticism begins to be popular. Scholars investigated the scope of Morrison's imagination in the context of African American history with reference to namely American culture, black culture and women's culture. Along with this multicultural reading are a group of essays fashioned by a theoretical perspective of narratology. In such essays Morrison's narrative art is carefully observed.

Some of the Chinese scholars have set out to focus on a comparative study between Toni Morrison and other American and British authors, such as Virginia Woolf, Faulkner and James Joyce. But few researches focus on a comparative study between Toni Morrison and Chinese female authors are being made. Actually, though America and China have a total different culture and social institution, some common social problems exist in both societies of which women's social position is the most obvious one. In this paper, two female characters Pecola and Sula respectively in *The Bluest Eye* and in *Sula* by Morrison will be taken to be compare to two corresponding characters Guba and Si Qiwen in *Gate of Roses* by Tie Ning. In my comparative research, I try to find out the common thoughts in terms of feminist consciousness. From a perspective of feminist consciousness, two extreme modes of feminist consciousness, one is a total loss of self-identity, the other is a burst of distorted feminist consciousness, in both cultures, there are disclosed, an object and healthy feminist consciousness is advocated.

### 1.2 Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, and *Sula*

Toni Morrison is the first Afro-American female author who was awarded Nobel Prize for Literature. Up to now, she has published 11 novels in total, including *The Bluest Eye* (1969), *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1999), *Love* (2003), *A Mercy* (2008), *Home* (2012) and

*God Help the Child* (2015). Her novels have opened the eyes of the perceptive readers and have made them become aware of the plights and predicaments of women in general and black women in particular. In all her works, the principal characters are women and it is through the female protagonists that Toni Morrison creates the right kind of woman consciousness.

The stories of both *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* happened after abolishment of slavery, but the shadow of it was still hanging over American society and African-Americans were in a subordinate social position. Black women were oppressed by racial and gender discrimination at the bottom of the society. As social beings, they don't have equal civil rights, and as family member, they have to follow the male family members' decisions. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola's mother was rather indifferent to her daughter's tragedy that she was raped by her own father. In *Sula*, Sula's grandma served men as God and pleased men. Black women had no rights for their kids, life and even their own body.

### 1.3 Tie Ning and *Gate of Roses*

Tie Ning, the chairman of Chinese Authors' Association, is one of the most famous contemporary female authors in China, and has been a six-time winner of many Chinese national prizes for literature, including "Luxun Literature Prize" that is one of the most honored prizes for literature in China. She has published 4 novels, including *Gate of Roses* (1988), *A Wash of Soul* (2000), *A Rainless Place* (2006) and *Benhua Village* (2012), and more than 100 short stories. Besides a novelist, Tie Ning is also a popular playwright. She has created a lot of TV series that are highly thought of among Chinese people. Her early works weaken a political background and focus on the daily life of common people, from which people's dreams, ambitions, contradictions and pains are carved out in great details. *Haystacks* published in the year of 1986 and *Cotton Heaps* two years later both make an introspection of the old Chinese culture and pay attention to the women's existence, which together signified that Tie Ning stepped into a new phase of creation. From then on, by means of good depiction of different images of women and careful exploration of their psychological activities, she devotes herself to mediating Chinese women's destinations. Tie Ning is acclaimed to be a feminist author and one of the most feminist-conscious authors in modern China. Her novels take a sharp shift from Chinese traditional female themes of a pure, romantic and innocent love stories to a piercing, calm and cruel reality of women's lives. *Gate of Roses* is the first novel to embody a feminist conscious awakening in China which owns a historical significance in Chinese literary history.

*Gate of Roses* is about a story of several women living in a traditional feudal extended family. At that time, feudal thinking took a control of people. Women were confined to their own room without knowing anything outside in a traditional feudal society. A virtual lady must follow some rules, "Three Obedience" for example: to obey her father before getting married, to obey her husband in her marriage, and obey her son if her husband dies. Women had no freedom to choose their own husband and were asked to be obedient to her parents' orders. After being abandoned at the wedding ceremony, Guba was psychologically distorted and disguised herself as a man. Another character Si Qiwen was betrayed by her husband and she took revenge to the men by the means of self-destruction.

## 2. Comparability of Women's Multi-oppression

### 2.1 A Specific Historical Background

The characters, in Morrison's oeuvres to some degree, are all influenced by the aftermath of American racial discrimination. Even after gaining freedom, the psychological trauma left in the free black people distorted their lives, including the recognition of their self-identity, the attitudes towards their fellowmen, and their location of their social position and so on. Such a distortion and repression, with an African traditional recognition of women, finds an outlet by transferring those negative psychological elements to the black women to ease them.

The story of Tie Ning's *Gate of Roses* happened in a very special period of modern Chinese history- "Cultural Revolution" (1966-1976), mistakenly waged by Chairman Mao Zedong and made a vicious use of by two usurping powers, which brought about a heavy disaster to all the Chinese nationality. These ten years of Cultural Revolution was a miserable decade of economic stagnation. During this period, for a purpose of self-protection, everyone was deterred in a danger, and was cautiously ready to suspect others. Friendship and love gave way to suspicion and indifference. Everyone was a suspect in other's eyes. So an even what makes matters worse is a loss of faith in a mutual trust among people and an extremely psychological abnormality caused by a severe political conflict. The women, restrained by a Chinese feudal idea of woman-man relationship that deprived the women of the freedom for their own lives, became the most miserable victims of this time.

## 2.2 Feministic Consciousness

What is a feminist consciousness? Psychologically speaking “consciousness” is often defined as: “A sense of one’s personal or collective identity, including the attitudes, beliefs, and sensitivities held by or considered characteristic of an individual or group.” (Fernandez, 2012, p. 21) Therefore it “brilliantly demonstrate that it is not women’s inferiority that has “determined their historical insignificance: it is their historical insignificance that has doomed them to inferiority” (Beauvoir, 2012, p. 151) It incorporates gender and the ways women are affected by issues resulting from it. The first polar of feminist consciousness is a lack of it, which is represented by Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* and Guba in *Gate of Roses*.

Pecola & Guba reacted to unfair treatment in the same way, while Sula and Si Qiwen shared the same “free will” to gain their independence and sense of existence. It is obvious that both in America where slavery was abolished and in China where feudalism was overthrown, women were still treated as “others”. So it is worth exploring their succeeding extreme reflections towards the surroundings which will help us set up an object and healthy feminist consciousness.

### 3. A Lack of Feminist Consciousness

First of all, Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* and Guba in *Gate of Roses* represented one polar of extremity. Aristotle referred that women are “female by virtue of a certain lack of qualities.” St. Thomas also referred to the woman as the “imperfect man”, the “incidental” being. De Beauvoir defines women as the “Second sex” “Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not in relation to herself but as relative to him; she is not regarded as an autonomous being.” (Rothman, Marcus, & Kiceluk, 1995, p. 118) For women, as human being at first, it is important to view themselves and be viewed as an identity-independent being, which is the first crucial step towards a full feminist-consciousness. Self-consciousness is often associated with shyness and embarrassment in which case a lack of pride and low self-esteem can result. In a positive context, self-consciousness may affect the development of identity for it is during periods of high self-consciousness that people come the closest to knowing themselves objectively. Both Pecola and Guba attempt to change their destiny by getting rid of their own identities.

Pecola, the heroine in *The Bluest Eye*, was born in a poor Afro-American family. Due to her darker skin, Pecola was despised by her fellowmen. In school, neither teachers nor classmates want to talk with her. “They gaily harassed her. “Black e mo. Black e mo. Yadaddsleepsnecked. Black e mo black e mo ya dadd sleeps necked. Black e mo ...”” (Morrison, 2007, p. 65) And at home, she was estranged both by her own mother and father. “Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove fought each other with a darkly brutal formalism that was paralleled only by their lovemaking.” (p. 43) So “it had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights-if herself would be different. Her teeth were good, and at least her nose was not big and flat like some of those who were thought cute. If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they’d say, “Why, look at prey-eyed Pecola. We mustn’t do bad things in front of those pretty eyes.” (p. 46) Her mother devoted herself in serving a white family, and gave all her love to the white girl, but indifferent to Pecola. When she smashed a plate by accident, “most of the juice splashed on Pecola’s legs, and the burn must have been painful, for she cried out.” (p. 109) But her mother “yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again, and in a voice thin with anger” and “hushed and soothed the tears of the little pink-and-yellow girl.” (p. 109) Pecola put her misfortune down to her identity-a black girl. She thought if she had a pair of blue eyes as Shirley Jane Temple who was popular among all the people, she would be loved by others. She was always drinking milk by a cup with Temple’s picture on it. Every time, she was looked down upon by others and laughed at, she was praying for the blue eyes. Even after she broke down after she was raped by her father and her baby was dead, she went to church, pleading Soapchurch for help. “Maybe you can do it for me...My eyes...I want them blue” (pp. 173-174). She had finally realized her dream in a world of hysterical fantasy. 11-year-old Pecola, easily subject to the mainstream culture, is not mature enough to develop her own aesthetic standard. She is longing for acceptance by others only through altering her own identity, which resulted in her tragedy. As Morrison mentioned her motive to compose this novel, “I try to show a little girl as a total and complete victim of whatever was around her.” (Morrison, 1994, p. 14)

In *Gate of Roses*, the first description of Guba’s appearance goes like this: “that is a man. No, that is a woman. No, that is man.” Actually, Guba was a girl from an extended feudal family, and before getting married “she was always wearing pretty dress, and tying her hair in two ponytails. She preferred to wear tights to show off her plump breast.” She was a quite traditional woman, and was married to an unknown man at her parents’ command. But she was deserted at the very night of wedding ceremony and was “returned” to her parents. Byron once said in *Jon Don* “Love means everything to women.” Under double blows of both a broken desire of marriage and the

harshest insult of being returned for women in a feudal ideology, she became to hate her female identity to which she blamed her predicament. Therefore, she began to change her female appearance, “cut her hair short, wore male shirt and behave like a man. People were puzzled by the missing of her breast.” For achieving sense of dignity of being the dominant, she even took a male dog as her husband and satisfied her biological desire by a sex with her sister-in-law. She was quest for equality by concealing her female characteristics and having abnormal sex, but was beaten to death naked in the end. As a French feminist theorist Simone de Beauvoir pointed out in *The Second Sex*, “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” (Beauvoir, 2012, p. xviii) Guba was a victim of an inequality between men and women in China.

Both Pecola and Guba are the victims of mainstream culture in their countries. They deny their identities and try to change the characteristics of their own identities to cater to the dominant culture. This is a consciousness that one doesn't have self-consciousness, but only is measured by another world. This is double consciousness, which is to measure one's soul by others or by another world.

#### 4. A Hostile Outlet of Feminist Consciousness

Opposite to a total lack of feminist consciousness is the other extreme one that is a hostile outlet of feminist consciousness. In this part, Sula in *Sula* and Si Qiwen in *Gate of Roses* will be discussed as two examples. In her *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir pointed out “He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is “the Other.” (Beauvoir, Borde, & Chevallier, 2009, p. 6) Such a relationship as the Subject and the other is abnormal from its own starting point, which damages equality between women and men. So, that women choose to become “subject” and subvert such a relation is also abnormal.

Morrison's novel's *Sula* is named after its protagonist Sula. Sula was a girl, living in a family without male members. Her grandma Eva was always taking side with men and urging the women around her to pay an absolute respect to their husbands, considering the men to be the center of her life. She was born for men, positioning herself in the subordination of the male and female relationship, while her mother Hanna was asking for an equally sexual relationship. Sick of Eva's attitude towards men and affected by Hanna's attitude towards sex, Sula was growing out of orthodox in her community. “She slept with white men,” (Morrison, 1999, p. 114) and even seduced her best childhood friend Nel's husband. But she left these men as immediately as possible after sleeping with them just once. She treated men just as the men did to women, a sexual partner, without any emotional relations. She “discovered that a lover was not a comrade and could never be—for a woman.” (Morrison, 2012, p. 54) Sula, with courage of challenging the social morality, smashed the shackles that were put on women and decentralized the male's traditional role in her community. Just as what she said to Eva “I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself” (Morrison, 2007, p. 21) To fight against the mainstream culture and traditional family concept, she isolated herself from her community and refused to communicate with her fellowmen. Isolation is one of the most damaging human experiences and is best treated by reconnecting with other people. (Miller & Strive, 1997) Actually, in spite of her pride of acting for herself, Sula felt rather lonely and was still expecting her friend Nel's arrival and forgiveness on her deathbed and she died a lonely death. Therefore, Sula's tragedy resulted from her extreme feminist consciousness. She put an extreme emphasis on her female identity, but ignored her social identity.

Different to Sula, Si Qiwen in *Gate of Roses* was a traditional Chinese woman at beginning. She was happy to get married and made up her mind to be a good wife. She did everything that a qualified wife should do in a feudal family, such as doing house work, to serve her parents-in-law, to raise her kids and to deal with every trivial affair in her husband's family. But she didn't gain acceptance in her husband's family, and even was ignored and betrayed by her husband. He seldom spoke her, or even had sexual relationship with a lot of other women. Simone de Beauvoir defined men as “the subject” and “the absolute”, while women as “the other”. The identity of “the other” must be approved by “the subject”. For a realization of her identity, a good wife, Si Qiwen taking along with her two kids, travelled thousands of miles to see her husband. But her illusion was shattered after she was infected by syphilis by having sex with her husband in brothel, and her son was terribly sick to death on their way home. Her feminist consciousness was awakened abnormally. As Jean-Paul Sartre said, a life's project to be in love may result in bad faith. She is, “like a poisonous poppies”, made everyone in her husband's family fallen out of traditional morality. She seduced her father-in-law to control him and became the real master of her husband's family. She also got a sexual outlet from her sister-in-law, Guba, who disguised her as a man. Si Qiwen, an actual master of her family, subverted “the subject” by incest, and sexually enslaved the male in her family by the means of self-destruction. Her distorted psychology enabled a hostile outlet of her feminist consciousness, which disobeyed a universally human morality and caused her tragedy.

Both Sula and Si Qiwen are the betrayers to challenge the male discourse. They take weapon of their own bodies

to throw off a traditional moral yoke on women and fight against the male power. But their extreme feminist consciousness that stepped across the basic line of universal moral standard brings about a miserable outcome.

### 5. Conclusion

From the analysis above, we can see that, Pecola, Guba, Sula and Si Qiwen, these four women were living in different times, different cultures, different social institutions and different countries, and they were depicted by two different authors, one is American and the other is Chinese. The only common thing among these four characters is the same desert of feminist consciousness they are living in, and the only common thing between these two authors is both of them are women. This further proved that, both in American and Chinese culture, women are confronted to a similar existential embarrassment. As the representatives of feminism in their respective literary worlds, both Toni Morrison and Tie Ning observe the female, write for the female and retrospect the women's fates, though they are living in two different cultures and institutions. They are contemplating the female deficiencies in terms of feminist consciousness with a calm and restrained attitude, and trying to reflect the barriers on their way to women's liberty by an artistic strategy. As a social being, the female in "the other" should promote their female consciousness to uphold their own civil rights. On the other hand, we have to distinguish an extreme feminist consciousness that is in defiance of the basic ethics and morality as a social being, both of which leads to the women's tragedies.

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