

One Way to Subjectivity: bell hooks on Postmodernism Blackness

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Abstract. Postmodernism is a new style that emerged in American culture after World War II, characterized by formalization, decentralization and commercialization. Bell hooks' Postmodernism Blackness argues that there is an antagonistic relationship between whites and minorities. In turn, postmodern art is an important way for minorities to challenge white hegemony and build subjectivity. The author takes *Captivity* by Sherman Alexie, a postmodernist writing on the Other as an example to explore the validity of this theory. On the acknowledgement of the Anglo world's long-standing oppression of Indian ethnicity, *Captivity* deconstructs the white imagination of Indian ethnicity and reconstructs a narrative about white, Native American as well their relationship from an Indian perspective. At the same time, the protagonist of Indian ethnicity in *Captivity* has an ambiguous relationship with the white character and presents an image that conforms to white stereotypes, reflecting the author Alexie's oscillating emotional position between whiteness and Indianness, which is rooted in his specific individual experience. Through an analysis of the context as well the text, it can be seen that bell hooks successfully portray the merging of postmodernist claims of decentrality and minority liberation demands, reflecting the significance of postmodernism for minority construction of subjectivity, but simplifies the issue of identity, ignores the complexity of identity in the real situation, and thus sees national liberation as the only way out for the ethnic minorities.

1 Introduction

Postmodernism is a cultural transformation in Western societies that emerged in the 1960s and peaked in the 1970s-1990s, featuring a distinguishable shift in literature, architecture, movie and other art forms from the preceding period[1]. Generally, Postmodern depicts art that is aware of itself, and as a result, postmodern art focuses on expression and is often ideologically deviant; in addition, because postmodern art was born in the context of consumer society, this art form is often willing to embrace "the language of commerce" and stops at superficial forms, emphasizing and imitating the fragmented and floating patterns of contemporary society[2]. In Western academia, there is a vast amount of discussion about postmodern art, in which two directions can be identified: one focuses on the artistic characteristics and expression methods of postmodern art, and the other is about the social contexts that generate postmodern art. In the second type of research, investigators usually link postmodern art to different aspects of the Western social environment after the Second World War, such as the rise of the consumer society and the affirmative action movement of ethnic minorities; therefore, this type of research presents characteristics of dispersion.

Among the many pieces, bell hooks' Postmodern Blackness is an object of interest. In her thesis, hooks

relate postmodernism to the reconstruction of minority identity and place a special concern on Black people[3]. Besides, hooks argues that postmodern art is the strongest and probably the only possible way for Black to reset their subjectivity, as the feature of decentered in postmodernism makes a dialogue between two orientations - with white intellectuals and the Black middle-class and underclass. Furthermore, hooks denies the risk of losing Black's specific history by criticizing "the authority of experience". However, as some commentators have pointed out, hooks' argument has two shortcomings: first, the discussion stays at the theoretical level and lacks factual basis, that is, the support of postmodern artistic achievements; second, although hooks points out in her article that her research subjects are not limited to black people, but also include Native Americans, sexual minorities, and other groups oppressed by white men, and in Postmodernism Blackness, she does not delve into the unique group memory of these groups and the unique performance of these groups in the wave of postmodern art.

Could hooks' concept be in line with the actual postmodern literary creation? To which extent is her theory valid in the light of cultural texts by non-white people other than Black? In order to answer the question of whether hooks' theory matches primary cultural texts, it is necessary to test her theory with the help of postmodernism's literary achievements. On this basis, in

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considering the compatibility of hooks' ideas with minorities besides Black, the author selects the poem *Captivity* by the Indian writer Alexie who conveys Indian subjectivity to counteract the voices of white intellectuals[4]. This research focuses on Alexie's postmodernist works with Indian ethnicity as the major character to test and extend hooks' theory, aimed at analyzing if hooks' theory fits postmodernism core texts and to enrich her idea by talking about "postmodernism otherness" on a broader scale.

2 Hooks' theory

Before exploring the relevance of hooks' views to the actual creation of postmodernism, a brief analysis of hooks' main ideas in *Postmodernism Otherness* is in order. Interpretations of the postmodern art wave are filled with white male intellectuals' voices, which indicates that these studies of postmodernism take on patriarchal and xenophobic connotations.

In this context, hooks argue for a focus on the connection between postmodernism and otherness, especially "a critical black presence" in postmodern art, to counter the current monopoly of white males in postmodern scholarship and thus reverse the direction of postmodernism theory. Hooks criticizes the existing white hegemony in existing research to suppress black voices and make them "invisible". On the one hand, the existing research rejects the decentered blacks' claim to construct subjectivity and characterizes it as "military protest," representing the denial of Black voices by most postmodernist writing. On the other hand, authoritative voices speak loudly and powerfully about minorities, define otherness in strict, monolithic and conceptual terms, and claim to have made significant progress in recognizing otherness. Bell hooks refers to these contradictory actions by white scholars as "essentialism," which solidifies the traditional white paradigm of minorities and thus prevents minorities such as Blacks, Asians, and Native Americans from having a voice; essentialism also prevents white scholars from truly understanding minorities through their richly diverse nature on a factual level.

Concerning the fact that the black community takes postmodern art (especially rap) to voice their dissatisfaction with the status quo, bell hooks demonstrates that postmodern art is of great importance for minorities to express their demands. Bell hooks cites Cornel West's argument that African Americans faced the realities of a restrained upward social mobility for the middle class and the increase in the number of black underclasses; in addition, the outlets for Black cultural production are strictly regulated. These conditions create "a sense of deep alienation, despair, uncertainty, loss of a sense of grounding" for African Americans, inspiring them to reconstruct grounds for black liberation praxis[3]. In this context, postmodern art, especially rap, became the most powerful way for blacks to struggle as subjects and to practice collective liberation.

Lastly, bell hooks offer a vision of the African American resistance struggle. She points out that black

liberation has to show multiple black identities in real situations to break the "authentic black identity" constructed by white intellectuals. Black intellectuals must continue to give critical attention to the black underclass because the latter nourishes the black community.

In *Postmodernism Otherness*, bell hooks notes that minorities such as African Americans are not only colonized on a de facto level but are also "culturally colonized" on a spiritual level. The "white supremacist capitalist patriarchal values" of the dominant group's long history of colonization among minorities has led the colonized groups to a state of self-oppressing, which refers to a condition in which the colonization makes minorities consider themselves inferior to the dominant group in terms of gender, race, culture, class, and even try to conceal their "inferior" identity[5]. However, as hooks argues, "[w]e cannot enter the struggle as objects in order later to become subjects (1994b: 46). The minorities represented by blacks do not acquire subjectivity by submitting to "white supremacist capitalist patriarchal values", rather, they obtain subjectivity by resisting authoritative discipline, which is what the emancipation campaign is all for.

Bell hooks' discourse on black liberation in *Postmodernism Otherness* is closely related to her notion of "love ethic", which lies in the center of the practice of freedom[6]. Bell hooks argues that to overcome the culture of domination, oppressed groups need to move beyond focusing on their own liberation and turn to the union of all oppressed groups. As bell hooks argues, it is "a love ethic " that "makes this expansion possible" (1994:290). In contrast, the dominant culture has an "anti-love" (1994: 293) nature.

3 The validity of hooks' theory

After a brief analysis of bell hooks' claims in *Postmodernism Otherness*, the next question to be addressed is: to what extent do these claims correspond to the writing of *Otherness* in the literary production of Postmodernism? Using Sherman Alexie's poem *Captivity* as a reference, the author will argue that bell hooks succeed in portraying that non-White self-writing marks the presence of these groups, reflects the minority practice of constructing a multi-dimensional self-image, and constitutes an impact on the narrative of authority, in other words, essentialism.

Before entering into the textual analysis of *Captivity*, the author will first introduce the content and background of the creation. *Captivity* represents Native Americans' response to "othering" through the Indian protagonist's self-confession to Mary Rowlandson. In *Captivity*, Mary Rowlandson, a white woman, suffers a car accident on a reservation and loses her memory. Her name is the same as the author of the 1682 captivity narrative "The Sovereignty and Goodness of God ", in which Mary Rowlandson, being a narrator, recounts her capture by the Indians and eventual escape and has been described as "the founding mother of American literature". For Indians, however, the Rowlandson legacy

has the exact opposite meaning: it created an image of ignorant, savage, and horrible Indians, a lie that entered the US national memory and has a pernicious effect well into the modern era. Not only the Rowlandson legacy but many historical events celebrated by white Americans, such as "the discovery of the 'new world' by European explorers", also have the opposite connotation for Native Americans than they do for whites: these histories are not glorious; rather, they are closely associated with the tragic passage of Indian peoples who were enslaved and killed[7]. Ironically, Indians who have long been oppressed and marginalized are seen by whites as an unstable and hostile force, an object of enlightenment. In short, similar to the position faced by blacks, Native Americans have long lived under the imagination of Indian ethnicity shaped by Rowlandson and her advocates and have also been denied the right to voice by the dominant group[8].

Indian communities' quest for liberation merges with postmodernism's call for questioning grand narratives and promoting individuality. In this context, Sherman Alexie achieves recontextualizing of the Native American by questioning the authoritative Indian ethnic narrative embodied in the Rowlandson legacy. First, the Indian protagonist in *Captivity* becomes the sole narrator, while Mary Rowlandson, who symbolizes the authoritative narrative, almost loses her voice; her only three utterances are all weakened. In section 10 of the poem, for example, Mary Rowlandson's word is suppressed by the scene, action, and speech: Rowlandson asks "how" with the faint action of "mouth[ing]", and the reservation 711's window separates her from the protagonist[7]. Thus, Alexie suggests that the oppressing effect of the legacy can only be identified by removing Rowlandson's voice. Further, *Captivity* reverses the authority structure from whites to Indians through the shift of the narrative perspective and the subject of discipline, contrary to the white "disciplinary power" created by "hierarchical observation" and "normalizing judgement" in practicalities, as noted by Foucault[9].

Moreover, Alexie uses the protagonist's voice to discuss the link between discourse and power several times, reflecting on the long-standing white monopoly on minority narratives, pointing out the absurdity of traditional narratives and overturning the white's imagination of the Other against Indians. For example, in part 9 of the poem, the protagonist refers to discourse as "the best weapon" and suggests that "every time the story is told, something changes." The words shape reality, and for white people, the narrative represented by the Rowlandson legacy suppresses the political and cultural status of Indians; Alexie chooses to do the opposite, using self-writing to reverse the forced voicelessness of Indian ethnicity. In part 4, the protagonist describes his perception of the white's imagination of its Other: "heavy lightness," "serious vanity," and "feather of lead" and some other paradoxical phrases are said to be the "language of the enemy", while the intertextuality of this piece is part 14: white man arresting Indians for running "when the sign said DON'T WALK", both unveiling the dominant

group's contradictory and fault-finding attitude toward minorities sarcastically and humorously. In summary, with a decentering approach unique to postmodernism, *Captivity* deconstructs the narrative of white people over Indian ethnicity, retelling the image of Native American and white.

4 The invalidity of hooks' theory

However, Alexie's work reveals a more complex orientation than bell hooks' theory: unlike bell hooks' explicit division of white male intellectuals as oppressors and oppressed in opposition to other groups, Sherman Alexie holds a more ambiguous attitude toward Native American and white groups, and more fluid about his own identity and the future of race relations. As noted earlier, *Captivity* questions the colonists' prolonged demonization of Indian peoples and retains some portrayals that fit Indian stereotypes: for example, the protagonist facing Mary Rowlandson, the outsider in Part 5, describes himself as a performer of traditional Indian arts -- a "fancy dancer". In part 6, the protagonist tells the white visitors how the Indians burrow into the bottle little by little; in part 7, the protagonist's mother takes the hole in the wall as her daughter. These descriptions can be interpreted as either irony or pandering to the typical stereotypes. The author holds that, as the protagonist says, "language is the most powerful weapon". These depictions are a deliberate play on language skills by Sherman Alexie; language, as a way for various groups to compete for political and cultural empowerment, is used not only by the "enemy" but also by the Indian narrator: the "enemy" uses contradictory language to squeeze the survival space of the Indian community, and the Indian narrator uses the same ambiguous and indistinguishable language to confuse the "enemy".

In addition, Alexie's Indian ethnicity's attachment to the white Americans fluctuates and is not entirely resentful; *Captivity* is interspersed with first- and second-person narratives to reflect the protagonist's on-again, off-again relationship with Rowlandson. Alexie sometimes uses "we" to refer to the protagonist and Rowlandson; for example, in part 6 mentioned above, Alexie sketches a scene in which the protagonist and Rowlandson dance together, and the protagonist expects to "forgive each other" with her, symbolizing the reconciliation between the Native Americans and the Anglo world[10]. Another example is part 13: "All we can depend on are the slow-motion replays of our lives." The two are placed together in a nostalgic situation, suggesting that both the protagonist and Rowlandson are victims of authoritative narratives. In other instances, the protagonist and Rowlandson are in confronting tension. For example, in part 10, the protagonist refers to an Indian man who "has haunted" Rowlandson "waking for 300 years," implying that Indian ethnicity maintains a concerned posture toward the white authoritative narrative. By doing so, Alexie reinforces the dialogical nature of the two races in the poem; specifically, he establishes Indian subjectivity and juxtaposes it with

white American subjectivity. At the end of the poem, the protagonist leaves Rowlandson and waits with a friend for a bus "to the dark side of the moon, or Oz, or the interior of a drum", where the prospect of his own race is metaphorically represented as a vain, unattainable dream[10].

The blurred sense of identity and position of the protagonist in *Captivity* reflects Sherman Alexie's personal experience of shifting between Indian culture and white American culture. Sherman Alexie was born on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, Washington. Born into a tribe that was neither Plains nor Pueblo, Alexie was alienated from core Indian cultural circles on the one hand and did not fit the image of the Indian known to white Americans on the other. Alexie is situated in the margins of both cultures, viewing both as components of his identity. This gesture shapes Alexie's position as both critical and sympathetic to both cultures. In another poem, he speaks more bluntly about his own state of mind: "Mixed-up and mixed blood/ I sometimes hate/ the white in me/ when I see their cruelty/ and I sometimes hate/ the Indian in me /when I see their weakness" (FI, 43). *Captivity's* protagonist sometimes nostalgically remembers the traditional Indian culture in romantic language and sometimes stands on the same side as Rowlandson, which mirrors Alexie's ambivalence.

For bell hooks, the picture of identity is much more precise. In *Postmodernism Blackness*, bell hooks presuppose that white males are in stark opposition to all other minority groups and that each individual's identity is defined and homogenous. Hooks further argues that minorities need to unite against the patriarchy of the privileged class in order to achieve joint emancipation. In addition, bell hooks' educational theory inherited the discourse of Brazilian educator Paulo on "the Pedagogy of the Oppressed" and reversed it to "Pedagogy of the Privileged", which also reflects bell hooks' "dichotomy"[11]. In sum, Sherman Alexie and bell hooks' different group memories and personal life experiences lead to their different perspectives on identity.

5 Conclusion

Linking postmodern literature with bell hooks' criticism, the author examines the validity of bell hooks' perspective with the postmodernism writing of the other to identify the strengths and weaknesses of bell hooks and then supplement it. Bell hooks' *Postmodernism Otherness* has successfully portrayed the "chemical interaction" between the other in American culture and postmodern art: featuring the challenge of authoritative narratives and promoting individuality, postmodern art fits in with the minority group's pursuit of breaking the stereotypes imposed by the dominant group and establishing their subjectivity.

Bell hooks perceptively points out the intrinsic connection between the minority situation and postmodern art. However, her theory does not reflect the subtle complexities of identity, and thus there is a rift with the actual situation of the other in postmodern art.

Minorities are presumed to be enemies of the white patriarchal system that stands as the oppressor and to have national liberation as a common goal. Nevertheless, the cultural situations and self-perceptions of national minorities are more complex than bell hooks' claims. For example, as a postmodernist writing of the Other, *Captivity* shows ambivalent and complex feelings toward whites and Indians, reflecting author Sherman Alexie's oscillating identity between the two cultures. In addition, *Captivity* asks the following questions about bell hooks' blueprint for emancipation: Is there any possibility of reconciliation between the oppressor and the oppressed, apart from confrontation? Can the beautiful vision become a reality? From this perspective, bell hooks' theory is overly broad and idealistic: not only does it fail to consider the complexities and subtleties of minority self-perceptions, but it also promises an overly simplistic and ideological outlook.

Besides, it is important to acknowledge that the author challenges hooks' theory from the perspective of identity only by taking Alexie's poetry as an example, which has certain limitations. To further refine bell hooks' perspective, more compositions about postmodernism and otherness have to be used in order to cut into hooks' theory from a more diversified lens.

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