FANTASY AND REALITY: ON THE THEME OF TIME-TRAVELLING IN
SONG OF SOLOMON

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Abstract

Song of Solomon is a masterpiece by renowned American author Toni Morrison, which profoundly explores the conflict and fusion between fantasy and reality through the growth and pursuit of the protagonist Milkman. This book skillfully integrates modernist and realist elements with the ancient folk legend of "black people can fly" as the main storyline, depicting a magnificent and vast picture of black people's survival with imaginative and colloquial language. This paper from the perspective of "time-travelling" intends to reveal the fact that the beauty and harmony of the fantasy world ultimately cannot conceal the cruelty of reality, and Milkman gradually realizes that true growth and self-actualization must be based on bravely facing reality.

Keywords: *Song of Solomon*, Milkman, Fantasy, Reality

Song of Solomon is an outstanding work by the famous American writer Toni Morrison, written at the age of 46, expressing her deep feelings for black people and considered as one of her representative works. This novel takes the experience of the young son of a wealthy black family, Milkman, who goes south to his ancestral home to search for gold, as the main storyline and symbolic core, and incorporates the ancient folk legend of "Black Men Can Fly" to present a magnificent and expansive picture of black people's survival.

The development of time-travel literature is in the ascendant, and it is now becoming an important genre of contemporary American literature, gradually attracting wide attention from scholars at home and abroad. So far, the study of time-travel literature abroad is still limited. In contrast, the study of time-travel literature in China is more numerous, but most of them focus on the film and television culture such as time-travel TV dramas and movies at home and abroad, while the study of time-travel novels is rare, and there are few systematic studies on the theme of time-travel in contemporary American novels. Therefore, this paper intends to take time-travel as the theme to explore the journey of African Americans from north

to south in *Song of Solomon* written by the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, Toni Morrison.

"Time-travelling" refers to the physical concept of "space-time travel", which can be divided into "time travel" and "space travel" according to the literal meaning. When writers introduce the physical concept of "space-time travel" into literature, it brings readers infinite imagination and realizes the simultaneous presentation of people, events, and things from different times and places, creating unexpected narrative art and dramatic conflicts. This directly leads to the rise of literary works with "time travel elements". Since the 1970s, various themed "time travel" works have emerged one after another, including comics of Americans traveling to ancient Egypt, movies of people from the future traveling to the present, and novels of Chinese people traveling to ancient times. Especially in recent years, there has been a surge of "time travel" fever at home and abroad, with various types of time travel works emerging in an endless stream. The word "time travel" has become an annual hot word, and time travel novels, as one of the genres of time travel literature, are having an increasing impact on society with their drama and plot tension brought by the interleaving of time, space, spirit, and values. Because "time travel" novels involve a wide range of time and a large span of space, studying the theme of "time travel" in contemporary American literature can help deepen the understanding of American literature, enhance the understanding of American and world politics, economy, and culture, and promote people's thinking about the current era and the eternal pursuit of human beings.

The rise of the term "time travel" and "time travel" literary works has been less than half a century from the perspective of time, and its global popularity has only been evident in recent years, indicating that it is still in its ascending stage. Therefore, there are currently no relevant monographs that systematically and comprehensively discuss it. The research results of domestic and foreign scholars on "time travel" works are mainly reflected in journal papers. Compared with China, there is less research on "time travel" abroad, and even fewer studies on the theme of "time travel" in American literary works. On the contrary, in recent years, China has witnessed a surge in the research on "time travel", which is prominently reflected in the individual or comparative studies on the definition, emergence, form, content, reasons for popularity, and value functions of domestic and foreign time travel dramas. At the same time, it also includes the organic combination of "time travel" with western literary criticism theories such as intertextuality, trauma, identity, aesthetics, feminism, postmodernism, and new criticism, showing a trend of thematic diversity, type diversification, and analytical theorization.

In the mid to late 20th century, "time travel" and "time travel literature" sprouted like bamboo shoots after a rain; the arrival of the 21st century further propelled the rapid development of "time travel literature". However, the research on novels with time travel themes at home and abroad has focused more on domestic or foreign TV dramas, movies, and other film and television cultures. Although some research has involved American novels, it lacks systematicness and comprehensiveness, especially a comprehensive and in-depth study of the theme of time travel in contemporary American literary works. Therefore, this paper follows the research trend of "time travel novels" since the new century, combining western literary criticism theories such as postmodernism, horizon of expectations, and close reading of texts to explore the causes and consequences of time travel represented in ethnic literary themes, as well as the different impacts it has on different societies, classes, and races, expressing the common ideals and aspirations of mankind.

Since the 1990s, *Song of Solomon* has begun to attract widespread attention from domestic scholars. The earliest research paper in China was "The Cry of the Soul and the Struggle of Women — An Analysis of Female Images in *Song of Solomon*." Subsequently, numerous scholars have analyzed the profound connotation of this novel from the perspectives of magical realism, black cultural positioning, binary opposition, black identity, alienation, black self-pursuit, imagery, new historicism, eco-feminism, post-humanism, Bildungsroman, archetype, and other perspectives.

Some scholars have also compared this novel with other black literary works or Tony Morrison's other works. For example, the paper "A Study of the Self-Construction of Black Men in *Invisible Man* and *Song of Solomon* from the Perspective of Intertextuality" points out from the perspective of intertextuality that both protagonists are influenced by the "double consciousness" during their growth and suffer from the innate lack of self. The lack of certain functions in their families further causes the protagonists to lose their selves. However, the two protagonists ultimately achieve self-construction through two diametrically opposed journeys, revealing the inheritance of the American black literary tradition by the two writers. In addition, the article "On the Post-humanist Thought in *Song of Solomon*" published in *Contemporary Foreign Literature* in 2012 analyzes the novel's natural view of harmonious coexistence between man and nature, moral and spiritual values, and the cultural view of harmonious coexistence of multiple cultures from the perspective of "post-humanism". There are many other research results that reveal the themes and profound implications of the novel from different perspectives.

Among most of the foreign research papers on *Song of Solomon*, it can be found that the perspectives of foreign scholars are quite different from those of Chinese scholars. The research perspectives abroad mainly include psychological analysis, Afrocentrism, politics and form, structure, etc. For instance, in the article "in Morrison's *Song of Solomon*", the author David Cowart placed "*Song of Solomon*" under the broader category of "literature" to explore its similarities and advantages compared to the novels created by Faulkner and Joyce.

From the current research situation at home and abroad, it can be seen that the research trend of this novel is based on the text itself, combined with many development factors such as American history, politics, and economy, to analyze the cultural heritage and inheritance of African Americans from multiple perspectives, as well as the spiritual strength and precious wealth exhibited by African Americans in the process of growth. This paper aims to explore the journey of African Americans seeking their roots depicted in the book *Song of Solomon* by American Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison through the theme of time travel.

1. Fantasy: Escaping from the Real World

In the novel, Morrison mentioned multiple times that the ancestors of black people could fly. "Flying" implies a change in space, specifically a migration from parallel space to outer space. Specifically, Milkman's fantasy is reflected in his pursuit of "Song of Solomon". This ballad not only represents the folklore and mysterious power of black people, but also becomes a symbol of Milkman's escape from reality in his heart. He believes that as long as he finds the truth of this ballad, he will be able to obtain the ability to fly and thus escape from the shackles of reality. This desire for flight is actually a longing for freedom and unfettered life, and it is Milkman's rebellion and escape from the real world.

During their escape, Macon and Pilate had a fierce conflict over the gold. Macon believed that they needed the gold because they needed to make a living and buy a farm to survive. However, Pilate thought that they couldn't take the gold away, otherwise others would think they killed for money. Later, Macon did not take the gold. When he returned to the cave again, he found that the gold had disappeared. So he once thought that Pilate had taken the gold away secretly. The gap between the two siblings became even wider. Similarly, although Milkman did not find the legendary gold at the end of the story, his close friend Guitar firmly believed that Milkman did not really fail to find the gold, but out of greed, like his father, he intended to monopolize the wealth and therefore invented a lie that he did not find the gold. Therefore, Guitar harbored resentment and chased Milkman all the way, pushing him to the edge of a cliff, leaving him in a desperate situation with no escape route. Even though they were members of the same black community, they suspected each other and were even willing to kill each other for the gold. This reflected the internal division within the same ethnic group, and it was this lack of unity that made the liberation and freedom of black people an even more daunting task.

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Milkman had heard of the legend of "Song of Solomon" since childhood, which was described as possessing mysterious powers that could endow people with the ability to fly. For Milkman, flying was not just a physical act, but a symbol of spiritual liberation and freedom. He longed to escape the shackles and limitations of real life through flying, fleeing from racial discrimination, family pressure, and the dilemma of self-identification.

Therefore, Milkman embarked on a journey to pursue the "Song of Solomon". He flipped through family historical documents, inquired about clues to the ballad from his elders, and even traveled far to find possible answers. During this process, Milkman's fantasies gradually intertwined with real life, and he often dreamed of himself flying, feeling intoxicated by the sense of freedom and unfetteredness.

2. Reality: The Shattering of the Fantasy World

In *Song of Solomon*, the coldness and ruthlessness of the real world form a stark contrast with the fantasy world pursued by Milkman, ultimately leading to the shattering of the fantasy world. This process not only reveals the cruelty of reality, but also profoundly demonstrates the twists and turns of Milkman's personal growth.

Milkman lives in a real world full of racial discrimination and oppression. As a black youth, he constantly feels the prejudice and exclusion from the white society. This reality makes it difficult for Milkman to pursue self-identification and belongingness. He tries to escape from this reality through fantasies, but the beauty and harmony of the fantasy world cannot ultimately conceal the cruelty of reality.

The shattering of the fantasy world had a profound impact on Milkman. He began to reflect on his escapist behavior and realized that true growth and self-actualization must be based on facing reality bravely. This realization prompted Milkman to actively understand his family history and cultural background, thereby establishing a sense of connection and belonging with the black community.

Milkman began to actively communicate with his aunt and other elderly family members, learning about their experiences and stories. These elders told him about the family's history and cultural traditions, giving him a clearer understanding of his identity and roots. Through communicating with them, Milkman gradually established a sense of connection and belonging with the black community, finding his place and value in society.

In the end, Milkman realized that true growth and self-actualization must be based on facing reality bravely. He no longer relied on fantasies to escape from reality, but learned how to find self-value and belonging in real life. This transformation not only brought Milkman personal growth and progress, but also laid a solid foundation for his future life path.

Through the continuous process of time travel, *Song of Solomon* demonstrates the shattering of Milkman's fantasy world, profoundly revealing the cruelty and ruthlessness of the real world. At the same time, it also showcases the twists and turns of personal growth, as well as how to achieve self-growth and transformation through bravely facing reality. With its profound themes and rich connotations, this work has become a classic in Toni Morrison's creative career.

Acknowledgments

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