

The Analysis of Cultural Memory and Identity in *Bless Me, Ultima*

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Abstract: *Rudolfo Anaya is a contemporary eminent Mexican American writer. Bless Me, Ultima is one of his most well-known works and also his debut in literature. With the guidance of functional memory theory in cultural memory and based on the background of the coexistence and development of various cultures, this paper is an interpretation of the national culture and identity by analyzing three protagonists' different recognition of cultural memory and identity. All in all, this paper shows that only when Mexican Americans have the courage to admit the culture diversity of all ethnic groups, absorb and connect all ethnic groups, as well as deeply realize that ethnic unity is the only way, can they reshape the cultural memory and reconstruct a real identity.*

Keywords: *Bless me, Ultima, culture diversity, cultural memory, identity, ethnic unity*

1. Introduction

Rudolfo Anaya, born in 1937 and died in 2020, is one of the most eminent contemporary Mexican American writers. He is the leader of contemporary Mexican American literature and has made great contributions to Mexican American literature and Chicano culture. In his whole-life writing career, he has won the American Book Award, Mexican American Literary Achievement Award, National Medal of Arts and many other awards. In 1972, his first work *Bless Me, Ultima* was published and instantly won the attention from the whole world, which laid the foundation for Chicano culture and Mexican American literature and opened a new writing area for American literature. Art comes from life. Rudolfo Anaya was born into an American family of pure Mexican descent, and his life experience has greatly influenced his writing career. Influenced by the surrounding natural and living environment, he has shown great interest in the Mexican culture around him since he was a child. And this experience provides inspiration and material for his writing career. Echoes of his childhood can often be seen in his works. *Bless Me, Ultima* is one such semi-autobiographical novel, focusing on a Mexican American boy's growth story with the quest for cultural memory and identity.

In the 1980s, German scholars Jan Assmann and Aleida Assmann put forward the concept of cultural memory. Cultural memory includes texts, pictures and rituals that are indispensable and used repeatedly by a society in a certain period of time. Its core is that all members share about the tradition of political identity and that related people use it to identify and establish self-image. Based on it, the collective members are aware of their common attributes and differentiation.[2] Cultural memory can be divided into functional memory and storage memory. Functional memory takes the present as the starting point and views the collectivized behavior subjects such as country or nation as the carrier to selectively remember or forget the past and spread the social values demanded for the construction of identity and behavior norms. Storage memory, on the contrary, is not directly related to the present. It takes individuals in a cultural group as the carrier and carries out indiscriminate memory of the past, which is the reserve of future functional memory and is not the basis of any identity.[1] Thus, functional memory is the main cultural memory that influences and constructs identity. The mainstream ideological value of national or collective recognition is the cornerstone of the national or collective people's identity. After the end of the Second World War, the racial contradictions in the United States became increasingly intensified. The minority civil rights movement was on the rise, and quantities of ethnic groups began to protest and try to gain more rights. Chicano Movement broke out at this time, Mexican Americans protested and shouted. They urged mainstream white society to give them equal treatment in political, economic, cultural and other aspects. When the Mexican civil rights movement was in the ascendant, the issue of Indian heritage in the Mexican cultural lineage came back to the people's sight. Therefore, this paper will carefully explore the differences of cultural memory and identity among Mexican Americans who are from different ages in the novel under the interwoven development of various cultures.

2. Protagonist's Parents: Believe the Original Mexican Cultural Memory

In the use of functional memory, the most common and important is legalization, which is often used by the ruling class. The ruling class chooses to remember events and actions that benefit it, to assert its legitimacy status, to legitimize itself, and to solidify its position in the future. Therefore, most of the legalized memories are mainstream memories or official memories, which can reflect the mainstream values of the country or nation and these kind of memories are recognized by the majority of collective members.

Antonio, the protagonist, was born in a Mexican American family with pure Mexican American parents. But Antonio's parents come from the very different subcultures. Antonio's father was born in the grassland village, is a cowboy with infinite love for the grassland. Cowboys have a long history in New Mexico. Ever since the Spanish came to New Mexico, they have made a living as cowboys. And his father loves the cowboy trade. Even after he reluctantly moves to Guadalupe with his mother, his father still makes a living as a cowboy. As a Mexican American who grew up on the prairie, his father clings to his cultural memory, always cherishes the prairie, and hopes that he could whip his horse to run freely on the prairie one day. His father's longings and hopes are deeply rooted in his blood. The longings and hopes are transmitted from generation to generation, and are the result of Mexican cultural inheritance from generation to generation. As a descendant of cowboys, his father clings to the memory of cowboy culture, and under the influence of that cultural memory, his father figures being a cowboy is proud. He even hopes that he take his sons to California vineyards to revive his career one day. His mother grew up on the land next to the river valley. Like her family members, she laboriously works under the guidance of the moon and has a deep affection for the land. She is a typical Mexican American peasants. Like most peasants born in the valley, his mother insists on her ethnic cultural memory and her ardent love for the land. She is pleased to be a farmer and fervently hopes that her son will have the same aspirations and identity as herself.

In the town of Guadalupe in New Mexico, the story place which is set in *Bless me, Ultima*, WASP cultural assimilationism, which gradually emerged after World War II, is suffering a certain impact. However, Spanish cultural supremacy formed in the colonial period is still deeply rooted. In people's daily life, the inhabitants in Guadalupe still speak Spanish, believe in Catholic, proudly claim to be descended from Spanish conquistadors or Mexican settlers and discriminate against Indians. Their attitudes towards Indians are almost like racial segregation.[4] The main protagonist's parents in this novel have the same attitude towards Indians, which means that they both are very contemptuous of Indians and their culture. They cling to the memory of the original Mexican culture and do not recognize or believe that Indian culture has an impact on their growth and life. Anaya writes about the Indian at the beginning of this novel, the only Indian in the whole village, who is very lonely. All the Mexican Americans don't have relationships with the Indian, and they don't allow their children to interact and play with the Indian. Worse still, the Indian even does not have a name, but is called the "Indian of Jason". These details show the only purebred Indian, is unfairly treated by the whole townspeople and they regard him as the other. All parents at that time firmly believe that their ancestors were Spanish settlers and that they are descendants of settlers. They are culturally different from the dispossessed Indians. However, that's not the truth. Indian culture is also imperceptibly infused into his parents' blood, although they are hostile to the Indians and their culture. Nobody feels that the Indian culture and lifestyle have infused in their daily life. Antonio's father makes it clear that he prefers the Indian cremation to the Catholic way of burying the dead in coffins, because he thought it is the most appropriate way for the dead to return to nature. This thought of reverence for nature is quite similar to that of native Indians, but his father does not seem to realize it. He often disparages and satirizes the Indians as other inhabitants in Guadalupe in daily life. When the children learn some spoken English at school, his father comments like following. "Ay! What good does an education do them,' my father filled his coffee cup, 'they only learn to speak like Indians. Gosh, okay, let's go!'"(Anaya, 54)

Antonio's mother's attitude to Indian and their culture is like his father, she refuses to associate with the Indians as a traditional Mexican farmer for generations. She strongly believes in Catholicism and considers that the Virgin of Guadalupe is the first black half-blood virgin, a localized product of Spanish Catholicism. Even though the whole family knows the story of the Virgin of Guadalupe appearing to an Indian child in Mexico, none dare mention it to their mother.

In this novel, parents' cultural memory reflects the legitimization of functional memory. In order to fully rule this region, Spanish colonists choose a series of memories conducive to power construction, and this chosen memory greatly impacts the collective cultural memory and identity. Antonio's parents and most people of their similar age firmly believe in the mainstream Mexican cultural memory, holding

the opinion that their culture has no cultural connection with the local Indians. The Indian culture is only the inferior product of the colonizers. In terms of identity, they are all descendants of Spanish colonists, not colonized Indians, so they firmly believe that there is no overlap in cultural memory and identity with the local indigenous Indians.

3. Ultima: Respect Culture Differences and Retain Original Identity

Discriminative functional memory is one of the most important forms in functional memory. Elder than Antonio's parents, Ultima also inherits the traditional culture from the Mexican nationality, and she gladly accepts and believes in the supremacy of Spanish culture. Her inheritance of Mexican culture is an instinctive inheritance from the cultural memory of her ancestors. As a folk doctor, Ultima also has a broad vision and rich experience so that she can accept different cultures of different nations. As for the discriminative functional memory of Indian culture, it is a choice that is made by following her own heart.

Although Ultima once lived with her parents in the prairie and she was loved by the villagers because of her occupation as a folk doctor and her helpful personality, the profession also brought some bad rumors to her. Ultima is so kind to Antonio's mother. She helped his mother to deliver Antonio and his elder brothers and sisters during their stay in the prairie village. Although she is old, Ultima still has a pair of clear childlike eyes, as if she could see through everything in the world. When Antonio first meets Ultima, Anthony disobeys his mother's instructions. He does not call her "Mama", instead he calls her name, saying that he would always take care of her. Rather than take offense, Ultima says that they two are bound to meet and get along with each other. Antonio has already formed a good relationship with Ultima at their first meeting. In his growing period, we can say Ultima is not only a family member for this young boy, but also a light directing his way forward. Her memory of culture and understanding of her own identity has greatly influenced Antonio on cultural memory of his own ethnic group and his identity, which inspire him to rebuild the ethnic cultural memory and establish his own unique identity.

Ultima always takes a walk on the vast grasslands of Iiano, feeling the peace and beauty of nature. She teaches Antonio to acquaint himself with the flowers and plants of nature, to appreciate the beauty of nature, and more importantly, to love and revere nature. "For Ultima, even the plants had a spirit, and before I dug she made me speak to the plant and tell it why we pulled it pulled it from its home in the earth. 'You that grow well here in the arroyo by the dampness of the river, we lift you to make good medicine,' Ultima intoned softly and I found myself repeating after her."(Anaya, 39) Ultima's love and respect for nature are reflected in her love for flowers and grass. This reverence feeling for nature is the same as the culture of the Indian nation. The Indians also hold a reverence feeling for nature which is filled with magician. To live in harmony with nature, people must learn to accept and respect nature. Otherwise, they will be punished by the nature and go to ruins. Instead of denying Indian culture as the protagonist's parents do, Ultima treats it with an open mind, especially on the relationship between man and nature.

Even though Ultima views Indian culture with a broad vision and an open mind, she still does not correctly recognize the value of Indian culture. In her perception, her medical skills totally are not influenced by Indian culture, but are the heritage of pure Mexican culture. While teaching Antonio about herbal medicine, "She spoke to me of the common herbs and medicines we shared with the Indians of the Rio del Norte. She spoke of the ancient medicines of other tribes, the Aztecas, Mayas, and even of those in the old, old country, the Moors. " (Anaya, 42) Obviously, Ultima sees the Indian culture as the other, and puts it in the same category with other cultures and compares it to Mexican cultures. Through her words, it indicates that although there is some overlap in herbs and prescriptions, she is a pure Mexican folk medicine with no connection to other races. Besides, there is a mystery about Ultima's religious belief. The author does not specify which religion she believes in. He writes that Ultima can not only go to church with her mother to wear shawl, but also talk with her non-religious father about the beautiful vision of riding on the prairie. All these plots show that Ultima has a broad vision and can accept the culture of different nations, and no longer despise Indian culture. However, her memory of culture and her pursuit of identity still have certain limitations. She believes that her medical skills are the product of orthodox Mexican culture and that her identity is a folk doctor of Mexican origin. She makes no effort to rid herself of the indianness of her blood.

Coming into a conclusion, Ultima treats ethnic cultures with tolerance, but she is still reluctant to admit that she has influenced by other ethnic culture unconsciously. In her recognition, Indian culture is distinct from Mexican culture. She respects different cultures, which does not mean she realizes that she has already had Indian culture blood in her Mexican identity. It also does not mean that she realizes that

she is not just a Mexican folk doctor, but a Mexican folk doctor with Indian features. Compared with Antonio's parents, Ultima treats Indian culture subjectively with discriminative functional memory. She has a broader mind to treat different ethnic groups and cultures. Even though Ultima makes some preparations for the establishment of new cultural memories, she still fails to construct new identities for American Mexicans.

4. Antonio: Reshape Cultural Memory and Construct a New Identity

Cold memory and hot memory are two different approaches that cultural memory treat and cope with the past. Cold memory refers to viewing people and events in the past as a recurring process and it denies and excludes the social changes. Hot memory refers to taking the experience and motivation demanded from the past to move forward, and using the memory to clarify direction and enhance confidence. Hot memory not only seeks and finds out the same things from the past as they exist in the present, but more importantly is to seek and find out something different.

The protagonist, Antonio, was born into a binary Mexican family. His father, who was born on the prairies of Iiano, makes a living by grazing. He loves the prairies and never believes in mainstream American culture. He wants Antonio to be a cowboy like him when he grows up. However, his mother was born into a traditional farming family. She loves her family deeply and wants Antonio to be a farmer like her father and brothers. Growing up in such family background, the protagonist has just experienced the double memory of Mexican culture since he was born. In addition, Antonio has an instinctive curiosity about Indian history and culture. He secretly visits the only Indian in town in spite of his father's threats and obstacles.[5]

Although Ultima's thoughts has certain limitations, she still has great impact on Antonio's thoughts. After her arrival, she teaches Antonio how to live in harmony with nature and provides a guiding light for Antonio to solve the confusion between cultural memory and identity. Therefore, this novel can also be seen as a Mexican American child's growth story under the shock of different cultural memories. Like all the children, Antonio is always wondering about the world. At the beginning of this novel, the writer writes that Antonio is pondering whether he should follow his father's advice to become a cowboy or fulfill his mother's desire to become a farmer or a priest. Then, after witnessing the death of Lupito, an ex-soldier who had been traumatized during the war, he begins to question the power and the authenticity of the almighty Catholic Church. During his growth, there are more and more matters that could not be explained by the powerful Catholicism. For example, uncle Lucas, suffering terrible sickness, the doctor can not cure him and the almighty priest is powerless, but Ultima has successfully saved uncle Lucas. Besides, why do the kids at school make fun of his lunch? Moreover, he has seen the pagan god "Golden Carp" in person, which greatly breaks his Catholic faith. Later, both the death of the brave and enthusiastic Narciso and the drowning of his best friend Florence have aggravated his doubts about the power of Catholicism and these matters also prompted him to think about culture. Why doesn't the Tenorio sisters, who secretly manipulated the fate of others and did all kinds of bad things, get punished in time? Why isn't Tenorio, the man who shot Narciso, brought to justice? Filled with these questions, young Antonio begins to wonder whether Mexican American cultural memory is objective and the authenticity of his identity .

With living with Ultima and under her guidance, Antonio gradually finds the answer in his daily life and manages to reshape the young generation's cultural memory and construct the real new identity. " 'Take the Iiano and the river valley, the moon and the sea, god and the golden carp and make something new,' I said to myself. That is what Ultima meant by building strength from life. "(Anaya, 247) By enumerating the binary opposites, such as Iiano and the river valley, the moon and the ocean, god and the golden carp, the novel indicates that Antonio has felt these two forces that cannot be ignored in his life, and he no longer wants to silently accept the paternal understanding, but wants to do something new. Different from his paternal generation, Antonio lives in a more complex and abundant social culture background than the early immigrants. Spanish cultural supremacy, American mainstream culture and regional Indian culture have interwoven and coexisted. He no longer emphasizes the legitimacy of memory in order to establish power mechanism and occupy the land which his parental generation do. On the contrary, he dare pursue for the roots of his identity and figure out the truth of each matter. Antonio has clearly learned that the seemingly binary opposites are not totally opposite. There are not only conflicts and contradictions between different cultures, but also exist communication and integration. "But it was true, the priest that came with the first colonizers to the valley of EL Puerto had raised a family, and it was the branches of this family that now riled the valley.some how everything changed. The priest had changed, so perhaps his religion could be made to change. If the old religion could no

longer answer the questions of the children then perhaps it was time to change it.” (Anaya, 247-248)

With his own understanding of life, Antonio makes a change instead of vehemently denying and opposing the existence of Indian culture in their culture like his father. He acknowledges the existence of Indian culture and realizes that Indian culture has had a huge impact on the Mexicans, which completely permeates in the cultural memory of the Mexicans. There is no doubt that since the Spanish colonized the local Indians, they lived together with the local Indians, married and had children, so that the Indian culture has been unconsciously integrated into people's life. Antonio is clearly aware of the fact. His father who is unwilling to acknowledge Indian culture prefers Indian funerals. His mother's attitude towards Indian and their culture is the same as his father, although his mother's sacred goddess is also tawny and shows herself to an Indian child. All these life experiences clearly explain that Antonio and his ethnic group are living in a criss-cross culture. They should not deprive the Indian culture of its important position in their cultural memory. What they should do is to correctly reshape the cultural memory and admit that the Indian culture is an inseparable part of the Mexican culture.

The new generation of Mexican American teenagers represented by Antonio is totally different from their parents, who has more courage to overturn the cultural memory of Mexican and their pursuit of identity is more authentic. They no longer adhere to the cultural memory of their own ethnic group alone, but embrace the multicultural development of Mexico and the diversity of the roots of their identity. Therefore, when they are in the face of Indian culture and mainstream American culture, they don't deny their roles in Mexican culture, but try to unite different ethnic groups to develop excellent culture together. And they manage to re-establish the real Mexican culture with ethnic unity as the core. The hot memory of cultural memory is reflected in the ethnic unity. They have realized that if the new generation of Mexican people want to rebuild the cultural memory, they must confidently walk on the only road that is the ethnic unity and embrace different cultures with an open mind. Only in this way can they build a unique valuable cultural memory for Mexican American people.

5. Conclusions

The ultimate goal of cultural memory is not to form an objective understanding of people or things in the past, but to construct the past as a consensus that can support the present and point out the future path. [2] Since its establishment, New Mexico has been a state with coexistence of many ethnic groups, including descendants of Spanish colonists, native Indians and so on. At the same time, New Mexico belongs to the United States and its culture is influenced by the American mainstream culture. In order to reasonably reconstruct cultural memory and seek real identity, it is necessary to take the road of ethnic unity, respect the culture of each nation, and learn from others. Starting analyzing this novel from three protagonists who live in different ages, this paper deeply discusses their different cultural memories and identities, which actually reflects the development and progress of Mexican American culture. As the descendant of the Mexican people, Antonio, the protagonist of the novel, no longer sticks to his own ethnic culture, but treats the cultures of different ethnic groups in the world with a broad mind and try to reconstruct his own identity. Rudolfo Anaya, one of the contemporary classic Mexican American literary writers, has real Mexican American blood. His opinions on Mexican American culture and identity can be seen through his literary works. Just as in *Bless Me, Ultima*, the Indian heritage is an integral part of the cultural identity of the Mexican nation expressed by the protagonist Antonio. He also hopes that the Mexican American people could identify and accept the Indian culture hidden in the obvious Mexican culture. And he tries to redefine the identity of the Mexican people, who are no longer affected by the American mainstream culture. There is no doubt that the unique cultural memory and identity embedded in *Bless Me, Ultima* have a huge impact on the Mexican community and the Chicano movement at that time. Maybe it is also the reason why this novel causes a storm in the literary circles around the world.

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