

An Ecofeminist Analysis of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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This paper aims to see the sights of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* through ecocritical lenses, to strike at the foundations of the cultural oppositions master - slave, white - black, man - woman, and to find an fellow feeling of the human domination over nature with the male domination over his female counterpart. The main protagonist of this novel, Sethe, is trying to reinstate her natural self-identity by reimagining and translating her earlier passive body into an lively one, which possesses action and the power of describing. Thus, from an objective of exploitation and elapsed history, she becomes the matter of her own sexual and tender needs, and she accomplishes to bring back together the precedent with a promised future. Her representational body is felt as a home where her own proceedings could be taken with self-esteem and possession; her body becomes environmental, meaning that the fluid discursive agency of the patriarchal and racial supremacy is negotiated and reconstructed within the framework of the enlightened white man domination over the wild nature. The oppositions linked to race, gender, society and nature ought to be overcome in order to ascertain an ontological and epistemological stability sandwiched between a white patriarchal society and a ethnically racialized and gendered nature, stuck between identity and alterity.

Keywords: cultural, oppositions, identity, ecocritical, ecofeminism, patriarchal

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is a postmodernist and magical-realist novel whose plot takes position after the American Civil War, at some stage in the Reconstruction era. It focus on the subject of slavery with a special apprehension on the supremacy of love, memory or history, race, gender, class and nature. Sethe is the main central character, a proud black woman who has tried to break away from the social constraint in which a woman of color had to subsist and perform. However, her most imperative ethical attribute is the love for her children, in this sense, the fortification from physical, emotional and spiritual ordeal representing an existential priority. The memory of a life infused with suffering and abuses, the hovering of slavery, the rigorous desire for freedom and the extreme love led Sethe to wish the death of her children. The internal reason of this apparently act of aggression relates to an keenness for freeing her children from the expected social enslavement and the material and psychosomatic ordeals to come. The act of killing is not

secluded from the rest of the plot and has distressing consequence on Sethe's psyche, her anxious mind being obsessed by regrets and memories. Another affect, associated with the relationship stuck between the white male tormenter and the black female subjugated, consists in an identity calamity, in which the distinctive and cluster identity are disjointed and segregated. This communal archetype represents the way by which the dominant, white and patriarchal society makes sure that numerous hierarchies of power are conserved in order to continue a class quo of economic, social and even sexual mistreatment.

An Ecofeminist Approach

Ecofeminism represents the main speculative background, but not the only one, from which this analysis is based on, and it loosely describes movements and philosophies that connects feminism with ecology (MacGregor 286). This has evolved from diverse fields of research, such as peace movements, women's health care, manual labor movements, environmental and animal liberation movements, social anarchism. Its main "premise is that the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature" (Gaard 1). Thus, there is a speculative and practical connection sandwiched between the oppressor, the dominant and rational man, and the oppressed, the woman who shares the same cultural anguish with Nature; their misuse and oppression are contextualized within the ecological framework. A unique material and pious connection between women's sensibility and nature is to be practical, this empathy representing the cause for men to act as if their female counterparts and the surroundings would be their substance of satisfying economic or primal needs. By not operating with differences, women overcome the cultural oppositions of self-other, mind-body, male-female, reason-feeling, human-animal, white black. There is the menace that, by incorporating the same patriarchal ideology into the ecofeminist discussion, one could counter-create an essentialist duality (even though not hierarchical) between Woman and Man. As in the previous environmental theories, a unprejudiced ecosystem represent an endeavor in itself.

Owning Nature

Ecofeminism is a multifarious movement and its features cannot be encompassed within a artificial account because the best turn of phrase of it equals to a social or a cultural-literary dynamics. Thereby, by exemplify, the novel *Beloved* focus on the escapee slave Sethe who displays several inner and outer conflicts. "Constantly switching between past and present events allows Morrison to portray the fluidity and instability of categories and how defying definition allows for resistance and healing" (Campbell 36-37). This unsteadiness means that the ideological communal structures have constructed slaves', and more than ever women's,

identities and the only way to recover is to reunite the throbbing wreckage of the past with the present and with the primary future. The concurrence of the ethnically unanimated nature with the objectified slaves by the leading white male forbidden the urban means to be a normal part of the surroundings and black people to be a constitutive component of the so-called democratic American society. "As a result, African American environmental relationships were fragmented and nature was revealed to be deeply politicized" (37) and racialized within a schizoid game of command, environment and individuality. Thus, both slaves and the environment were related to wilderness, primitiveness and to the unknown and for this reason they have had to be restrained according to explicit communal codes. Making order into this apparent disorder was a moral duty for the cultured Western male who had to put forth his manhood over those savage and virgin territories, ignoring alterity and unfamiliar cultures. A obstacle for transforming the cultural wasteland of the slaves into passive objects of utilization was the ordinary setting itself, which had to be "whitened", and also women, who were infused with a elevated level of promiscuity and "simulated" desires. In this citation from the novel under inquiry, a binary opposition between the white owner and the black owned is displayed in order to highlight the enlightening and constructed peculiarity. It is important to highlight that the leading class "believed", connotation that their purpose authenticity may be questioned and counter-demonstrated. The preposition "under" shows the fact that the negroes' identitary quintessence is contextually negotiated by the societal hierarchies of supremacy, their identities being solely immanent to their master. It sounds as if, the black gist is beyond intellectual capacity and the white's power cannot restrict it due to the " unnavigable waters, swinging screaming baboons"; this discursive image conveys the tremendous and apophatic dichotomy self-other. Nonetheless, the hypothetical black "jungle", well thought-out to be exterior to the white man, exactly as the environment, is fictionally and representatively internalized or, on the contrary, this wasteland represents an externalized state of mind. Thus, "the red gums" have belonged to the white "baboon" from the very beginning and the tyrant has destined what he created. This conflicting view of nature, related to the leading class, gender and race, has the purpose to divide the suspected realism in order to keep their constructed power and its mechanisms. "White culture relied on this fragmentation because it helped maintain a system that rejected black citizenship through denial of freedom, property ownership, and recognition of African history and spirituality" (Campbell 41-42). The procedure of crumbling represents a vicious form of dominion in which the axiological and consubstantial immovability between people or amid human beings and surroundings is intervallic. The subject or the tyrant objectifies the former subjects (slaves, black people, women) in order to convert them into restrained objects; this epistemic defeat equals to a process of commodification in which slaves, women and the surroundings are detained as economic goods or personal pets. Sethe, the main character, is the ideal example for being a commodity and a sexual object at master's dumping; her memory

represents a poignant tool which bridges the past and the present, the magnificence of nature and also its sickness, the latter being a result of the white man's imposition upon the natural order: "there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream, it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty" (Morrison 3). She remembers her mother who "had the bit so many times she smiled. When she wasn't smiling she smiled, and I never saw her own smile" (116). Women shared (have shared) with Nature the same ordeal: to be subjugated for patriarchal advantages. Having been measured commodities and exploited for economic reasons made slaves to be socially constructed as sub-human, having (sub)animal features: "something else and that something was less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub." (43). They sometimes practiced a lesser extent of freedom and dignity than animals; in this sense, the teaser may be considered having a pre-capitalist behavior and being tedious of the long-term output of the black people. When Sethe tries to understand that "a characteristic is a feature. A thing that's natural to a thing" (109) and she is instructed to "put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don't forget to line them up" (111), we notice the fact that her womanhood and blackness are emphasized and "othered" in order to draw an artificial "line" between the self, who creates hierarchies of power, and the other, who (which) is objectified and reduced to an animal. Furthermore, this cultural detention is detained as being "natural" for the oppressed, seen as a "thing"; in other words, black people are not socially constructed as real persons and the objective reality, in this case nature, is culturally confiscated and reshaped according to the oppressor's wish and needs. "American culture has employed the concepts of natural and unnatural to reinforce ideological boundaries between the human and the less-than-human" (Campbell 47). Most of all, women of color suffered twofold: because they were not white and because they were not men. Sethe remembers that the white men "held me down and took it. Milk that belonged to my baby..... they handled me like I was the cow, no, the goat, back behind the stable because it was too nasty to stay in with the horses" (Morrison 114). Sethe, as the prototype of the oppressed female, is situated at the bottom of the chain of power and has to undergo whatever the white man considers to be apt. He decides everything and environment is epistemologically constructed by the male observer due to the fact that the environment functions as a medium "environing" the rational mind. Thus, what is natural is, in fact, an ideological product of the patriarchal society; if holding and calculating nature is "natural", the monstrous act of taking away something cherished to a woman represents a justified thing to do. Stealing milk equals to a barbaric act of showing that women have no privacy, no personal lives, no maternal independence, no control over their future or over their own identities; they correspond to a natural belongings.

Reclaiming the Feminine Oikos

As seeing above, women of color were considered natural property, meaning that the surroundings was racialized and gendered, and women were ethnically naturalized as belonging to their master. There is a narrative and symbolical similarity between the black woman and Nature, both of them having been extremely subjugated and treated as commodities. These two categories are muscularly related through the society of tree images; these plants have been worshipped and considered to be sacred for millennia: "a green tree usually stands for eternal life, immortality and undead spirits, whereas a leaf-shedding tree represents new life, rebirth and resurrection" (Tjerngren 5). They mediate between the manly Uranus and the womanly Gaia, astral opposites, but, at the same time, corresponding. From a mythical, dendrological and pomological point of view, the Tree of Life represents a theological and genetic metaphor for the world, making the connection between the sanctified sky, the earth and the underworld. From a biblical perspective, which has Mesopotamian roots, it is the counterpart of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The Tree of Life, from which Adam and Eve did not taste, could give them everlasting life. It transcends the binary opposition of good and evil and represents both life and death, within a constant cycle of indiscretion and reborn. When Sethe says: "if I hadn't killed her she would have died" (Morrison 114), she actually conveys the meaning of a valueless life without freedom and, thus, the transgression of killing is connected with freedom, alike the legendary story of the original sin when the primitive couple exerted their free will and lost immortality. Continuing the analysis upon the main protagonist's trauma, we may infer that "trees function as a screen" (Tjerngren 6), allowing one's to suppress painful memories: "Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world. It shamed her--remembering the wonderful soughing trees rather than the boys" (Morrison 3). Another psychological surrogate occurs when remembering Sweet Home, where trees are more significant than the "house of horror". On the other hand, trees are linked to men's destiny, may be because there is a symbolical need to protect the feminine counterparts: Sixo is burned next to a tree, Paul A hanged from a tree as probably Halle; nevertheless, they do not represent evil because the cruel acts belong to the white men, not to Nature itself.

Another dendrological image relates to creating edifying oppositions when the school teacher, the male authority, writes slaves' distinctiveness, using an ink made from trees and contrived by Sethe; "He liked the ink I made" (22); the differences are exterior because the discourse of alterity and authority is written with the same natural essence with the help of which a likeness between nature, woman, man, white and black is underlined. After escaping, Sethe sees the white girl Amy Denver "come out the trees" (Morrison 105); although she posses the power of whiteness, Amy does not have the authority of a high-class man and, thus, shares with the black woman the lack of social power, being both "lawless outlaws" (50). When rescuing Sethe, her breath is "like burning wood" (46), a symbol for life, power and soul, in the ancient Greek psyche representing the force which animates bodies.

Passing to the narrative present, environment represents a place of psychological consolation and refuge from the built environment; Denver, Sethe's daughter, named after the white girl, seeks spiritual or sexual solitude in the middle of the boxwood bushes: " Veiled and protected by the live green walls, she felt ripe and clear, and salvation was as easy as a wish". Here, she felt " as a person rather than a structure" (17); the antagonism between her, as a woman with free will and many needs, and social structures, infused with patriarchal hierarchies of power, is mediated by the oppressed nature, which represents a place of inner connections. Baby Suggs also uses nature to suitable black people to the environment; thus Clearing, this special place within the forest with free folks instead of trees, represents a place of acceptance and communitarian healing, where the body feels as being home.

Yonder they do not love your flesh. They loathe it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my community they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either:

...You got to love it, you! And no, they ain't in love with your mouth... Yonder, out there, they will see it broken and break it again... What you say out of it they will not heed... What you scream from it they do not hear... What you put into it to nourish your body they will snatch away and give you leavins instead... No, they don't love your mouth... You got to love it. This is flesh I'm talking about here...Flesh that needs to be loved (52).

The tree from Sethe's back represent the scar adorned by the authority of the white man who entered powerfully the virgin scene of the Black Woman. Being a victim of social and sexual abuses, the main moral fiber of the novel has let the domination of men to rule over her natural self and let her uniqueness to be constructed by the masculine power. Realizing that the past should not be elapsed, but incorporated into the present, she accepts the slavery and gender sufferings and sublimates them in order to outshine the structural "tree" and to convert it into a home inscribed with her own "ink" of ethnic, gender, affectionate and sexual love. The incoherent past and memories are gathered into a holistic self who tastes both evil and good of life.

Conclusion

Etymologically and linguistically speaking, to recuperate something means to get hold of a thing which once belonged to the original possessor, in this case, the American African woman. She

had mislaid it or it had been confiscated by someone. Thus, her stolen energies are fundamentally hers and the societal hierarchy has been constantly carrying away her power of resolution. Moreover, to retrieve also means to bring fallow areas or wasteland into a condition of nurturing. The cultural discernment about women is that they are the opposites of the lucid men who have the noble duty to plow and to tame the women's susceptibility. On the other hand, oikos (from the Greek οἶκος) represents the same root for environmental science and economics, opposite domains of cultural research, and means house or family. Ecosystem relates to nature, culturally apparent as an unfamiliar medium which environs the built or town medium. On the contrary, economy relates specially to consumerist societies in which the means of creation and human needs are far more important than preserving the natural background. Therefore, these two terms are incompatible from a cultural point of view; nevertheless they can be married from a postmodern and poststructuralist standpoint by deconstructing this binary opposition. As inferred before the human social-economic medium and the non-human natural one are consubstantial in terms of their mythological, historical and social development, the former being a natural conservatory of the latter. Continuing the previous ideas, reclaiming the feminine oikos means for women to take back what was theirs from the dominant men and to reclaim a sense of home and society within the larger ecosystem of nature, society and structures of power. Nature is not anymore a unbiased environment, which "environs" the humanminds and society, but an oikos, a home where an ontological permanence between human beings and nature is to be observed. Women have become natural by being a part of nature, not by segregating the human survival from its natural foil.

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