

An Ecofeminist Reading of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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Abstract

The present paper aims to evaluate Toni Morrison's one of the finest pieces of work, *The Bluest Eye* through the lens of Eco criticism and feminism. Being an African American narrative, nature remains at the crux of the novel. Guided by the symphony of nature and narrated by the nurturer in the form of women, it tell – tales the saga of Africans living in America, especially women who are doubly jeopardized in the name of class and colour. The novel, *The Bluest Eye* embodies the story of a Black girl who was treated badly and even harshly as she lagged behind because of the hegemonic differences. Equating nature and women as they tackle the same issues of subjugation and brutality, it is to deal with the sense of respecting nature and women, availing them the rights they supposed to adhere and enabling them to be a part of this world with equal sense of existence.

Keywords: Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, Eco criticism, Feminism, African American, Black

Women have traditionally been associated with nature. The phrase “mother nature” and the picture that results from it, offer two benefits. It feminises nature and, first of all, naturalises women. This illustrates the idea of nature as a woman whose primary responsibilities are nurturing and procreation. The above womanly traits are generalised in terms of nature, and perceived quite natural to her. Treating both nature and women on the basis of their biological aspects, it is assumed that their fundamental duty is to sustain and provide for the human race. Although, these so called man-made qualities are the attributes and the accolades bestowed by males resulting in the domination of both women and nature. Men assume that they are the authority having all the power and prowess to exploit women and nature the way they want and can.

Thus, came the ecofeminist voice asserting the notion of equality for both nature and women as they are equally oppressed by male ways of thinking and action. Ecofeminism, as a term was pioneered by the French feminist, Francois d' Eaubonne. She focuses on the kinship between women and nature which encourages the interdependence of human and environment thereby facilitating social and environmental ethics with special concern on women and nature. Francois d' Eaubonne coined the term “ecofeminist” in 1974 (*Earthcare* 5) to bring to the fore the

vital fact that the polluted and populated male dominated society has depleted the very essence of the natural atmosphere and is a threat to the environment. Ecofeminism connects feminism and ecology to describe movements and philosophies related to its advancement and acknowledgements. The problem of social construct along with ecological imbalance in the hands of society and men called for an awakening. According to Charlene Spretnak,

“Ecofeminism grew out of radical or cultural feminism, which holds that identifying The dynamics behind the dominance of male over female is key to comprehending every expression of patriarchal culture with its hierarchical, militaristic, mechanistic and industrialistic forms” (5).

The environmental crisis raised the consciousness of women about the well-being of earth as they began to think and feel an interconnectedness between the devaluation of nature and their own demeanour, identity, and self. Both nature and women works in an unison, strengthening both feminist and ecological movements to end the oppressive thinking and action towards them.

Toni Morrison with her scintillating array of literary oeuvre, is considered the best fiction writer in the world. Not the best woman writer, not the best black writer or the best American writer- the best fiction writer in the world. There had been black women writers before her like Zora Neale Hurston, Lorraine Hansberry, Gwendolyn Brooks, but she stood perfectly different with her narratives. Toni Morrison felt that she was alone in wanting to express the world of the black people she'd grown up with. Above all, she wanted to talk about the people who were always in the background – like little girls. Little black girls. Toni wondered if she was the only person in the world who thought it was important to tell their story.

Beginning with her debut novel, *The Bluest Eye* published in 1970, is the story of three black school girls growing up in 1940s Ohio, the sisters Claudia and Frieda MacTeer and their friend Pecola Breedlove. Claudia and Frieda's parents are strict, protective, and when they have time – which isn't often - loving. Pecola is ignored by her mother and abused by her father. Claudia, who tells much of the story, is a strong-willed eight-year old black girl who can't stand the sight of little blond-haired, blue-eyed dolls. Through them, Morrison investigates the devastating effects of the beauty standards of the dominant culture on the self-image of the African female adolescent. The role of class is only relevant insofar as it exacerbates the self-image of the African female.

The Breedlove family has moved from the South to urban Lorain, Ohio, and the displacement, in addition to grinding work conditions and poverty, contributes to the family's dysfunction. Told from the perspective of the adolescent sisters, Morrison's narrative weaves its way through the four seasons and traces the descent of Pecola Breedlove into madness. Through flashback and temporal shifts, Morrison provides reader with the context and history behind the Breedloves' misery and Pecola's obsessive desire to have “The Bluest Eye”.

The novel serves the purpose of delving deep into the gender and class conscious way assimilating things in a way to equate it with the ecological harm being given by the urban locales and man-made dangers. *The Bluest Eye* has come a long way, embodying major participation not only as a novel but a narrative touching uncountable lives with its people and emotions. It has been a matter of discourse and discussion since long, evaluating it in terms of post colonialism, feminism, and Eco criticism. Thus, combining the notion of feminism with Eco

criticism paved the way for a new dimension to be approached, providing a new lens to glance at the novel, *The Bluest Eye*.

From the very outset of the novel, the Eco critical bent is quite pervasive throughout the story. It is mentioned that ‘...there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. ... It was because Pecola was having her father’s baby that the marigolds did not grow’. Nobody seemed happy with their fields as their seeds did not sprout. No marigolds were there. Claudia and Frieda wished for a healthy and safe delivery of Pecola's baby but all turned out in a fiasco. The imagery of their sowing seeds in the ground and saying right words assuming the future of Pecola Breedlove and the seeds that both would find their respective places accordingly is magical but futile. Nothing came out from the ground and that the girls understood what had happened when noticed,

“We had dropped our seeds in our own little plot of black dirt just as Pecola's father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt”. (Morrison 5)

Claudia even adumbrates that the innocence and faith with which she and her sister Frieda went through were lesser than the lust or despair endowed in Cholly Breedlove. The seeds shrivelled and Pecola's baby as well. Both the natural phenomenon couldn’t stand the atrocities of the world. The analogy of seed and a human baby signifies the devastating nature of man towards ecology and human beings. This novel critically yet very beautifully depicts the comparison, relation, and state of Nature and women. It is divided into four seasons, starting from autumn, winter, spring and summer. The spring season being the traditional time of rebirth and renewal, newness, but for Pecola it turned out to be the time when she was raped by her father, brutally harassed, psychologically challenged by the society and physically by her own parents. Her baby died in autumn, the season of harvesting. When the time came to harvest the sown seed, it turned out into nothingness. The ecological cycle of ecosystem symbolises all the unnatural happenings and misery of the character, especially black and women.

Pecola and her longings for the bluest eye is symbolic of the opportunities that only blue eyes can prevail. The very word ‘bluest’ is superlative in degree, embodies the notion of getting all the best things of life, the idea of living life to the lees. Pecola is the one who is deeply touched with the atrocities of her sustenance. According to her way of living, way of interpreting life can be changed if and only if she will get those blue eyes like Shirley Temple, and having blue eyes means having fair skin. That fairness of skin is important to avail oneself the better opportunities. With all the atrocities of living in a pit where shadows can prevail, showcasing the blackness of being African Americans, it would be very authentic to place nature and women on the same plane and destruction through urbanization and men on the same.

Toni Morrison’s concept of nature through the lens of this novel, *The Bluest Eye* encompasses the serenity, innocence, and purity of the natural world which has been keeping the world in unison with each other since time immemorial. With the help of three little girls, Pecola, Claudia, and Frieda, Morrison inculcates the notion of environmental issues its degradation, and ill-treatment in the world. She even condemns the idea of treating ‘mother nature’ as a feminine entity just because humans have treated nature in such a way that it harshly disturbs the ecosystem leading to ecological imbalance in the same way men have done to thrash the identity of women. Adding more to this, Morrison has put up the examples of marigold flowers and dandelions. Claudia, the narrator reveals that it was fall of 1941 and there were no marigolds.

The flower did not sprout, telling the whole world its painful story of being infertile this year. This infertility of the earth is symbolic of the unison that it has with Pecola as she is impregnated by her father which is quite an unnatural and against the rules of our existence.

Nature is shedding tears by not growing flowers. As humans have destroyed the natural cycle by their interruption in the environmental scenario, nature has also stopped being their well wisher. It is mentioned that 'it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow'. Rape is symbolic of the destruction of nature by human beings which is evident from the unsprouting of the marigold flowers. Through the innocence of these two MacTeer sisters, Morrison reveals the disgusting phenomena that happened to Pecola and changes her throughout her life or makes her lifeless. As MacTeer sisters said,

“We had dropped our seeds in our little pot of black dirt just as Pecola's father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt” (4).

They are more concerned regarding the safe delivery of Pecola's baby. But the lust or despair of Pecola's father overshadowed their faith. And nothing remains at the end but Pecola and the unyielding earth. The earth retorts in its own way as they suffered utmost destruction and devastation, and subjection on the hands of humans. Men has equated nature with women. They have dominated both environment and women in the same way. There is an interconnectedness in the violation of women and onslaught on nature. Men have snatched the purity of the pristine nature just as all those happenings in Pecola's life makes Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola herself mature. The damage done to Pecola is total.

The symbolic interpretation of dandelion as an unnecessary thing in the lap of earth relates directly to Pecola as she has been treated as an unwanted female rather a human in the scenario due to her not belonging to the white class of people. It harms not only her physical being but harshly effect her psychological demeanour. She let herself fall victim to the ruthless devastation of her physical aspect as she innocently thought or misplaced the act as love, that can somehow make her promising. From the very beginning, she longs for establishing her presence everywhere, being precise it only means she has been fighting for establishing her identity. The identity issue can only be resolved by getting blue eyes. Having blue eyes like Shirley Temple means getting opportunities and achieving everything that one longs for.

So, the weeds are ugly and unproductive, and people use to uproot them on the basis of their ugliness and unimportance: “ They are ugly. They are weeds” (37). All the natural wild plants are destroyed, even the garden of Miss Dunbar suggests the meaninglessness of beauty in today's living world where industrialization and urbanization takes place in the name of modernization. And this further leads to the devastation of our ecosystem and becomes a major threat to natural environment and harm to a balanced ecosystem. Pecola is in a way incarnates a wild free spirited soul which nature has, and freedom of will that nature inculcates. *The Bluest Eye* is in fact significant as it depicts the natural world of sanity and serenity which is destroyed by the chaotic insanity of the so called modernized world. The rape of Pecola by her father is a poignant metaphor of rape of earth. The decorum and sensitiveness of the relation between a daughter and a father resembles the same equation of heart of men towards nature. But all those becomes false interpretation as nothing works when trust is broken, there remains a shattered connection or no connection at all. Pecola's innocence and helplessness is nothing but nature's

purity. And in the same way her body can be correlated with the natural landscape which is violated by various conquest and wars to establish authority over it.

Pecola observes: ““even now spring for me is shot through with the remembered ache of switchings, and forsythia holds no cheer” (75). The horrible risk in the biotic world and the expected apocalypse is predicted in the last part of the novel titled, “Summer.” Summer is no more here a culmination of the spring time beauty, instead we are told that “the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year” (164). It is evident that through the death of the marigolds, the grass, the unhygienic river and the colourless spring in the novel *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison brings to the fore the onslaught on nature and total destruction of the environment.

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