



EXPLORING THE PERSPECTIVES OF CULTURAL ECOLOGY AND ECO-THEOLOGY: AN ECO-FEMINIST INTERPRETATION OF TONI MORRISON'S SELECT NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

Eco-criticism has become one of the most visible and productive new directions of literary and cultural studies. Eco-criticism has gained increasing recognition as an important new field of research and teaching that opens up a broad spectrum of new perspectives and that can help to reaffirm the relevance and responsibility of the humanities and of literary studies. Eco-criticism, which has developed especially in Europe, is the approach of Cultural Ecology. Cultural Ecology considers the sphere of human culture not as separate from but as interdependent with and transfused by ecological processes and natural energy cycles. The concept of eco-feminism uses the age-old connection between women and nature as a bridge to strengthen both the feminism and the ecological movements which seek to end the oppression of Women and Nature Both Nature and Women are important themes in Toni Morrison's novels which provide the appropriateness of applying this theory to her novels. Eco-theology is a form of constructive theology that focuses on the interrelationships of religion and nature, particularly in the light of environmental concerns. Eco-theology generally starts from the premise that a relationship exists between human religious or spiritual world views and the degradation of nature. The main content of this paper is to analyze the ecological feminism factor in Toni Morrison's select novels from an eco-feminist perspective to reveal the significance of eco-feminism in the novel and evoke the reader's awareness of eco-feminism.

Key Words: Eco-feminism, Eco-theology, Cultural Ecology, Oppression, Racism, Suffering.

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Recently, Eco-criticism has become one of the most visible and productive new directions of literary and cultural studies. Eco-criticism has gained increasing recognition as an important new field of research and teaching that opens up a broad spectrum of new perspectives and that can help to reaffirm the relevance and responsibility of the humanities and of literary studies. Eco-criticism, which has developed especially in Europe, is the approach of Cultural Ecology. Eco-criticism is fundamentally

concerned with the relationship between culture and nature. Cultural Ecology considers the sphere of human culture not as separate from but as interdependent with and transfused by ecological processes and natural energy cycles. At the same time, it recognizes the relative independence and self-reflexive dynamics of cultural processes. Even as the dependency of culture on nature, and the ineradicable presence of nature in culture, gain ever more interdisciplinary attention, the difference

between cultural evolution and natural evolution is increasingly acknowledged by cultural ecologists. Eco-feminism describes movements and philosophies that link feminism with ecology. As the environmental movement along with environmental crises raised the consciousness of women to the decay of the earth, they began to see a parallel between the devaluation of the earth and the devaluation of the women. Women began to see the link as not a false construction of weakness, but as a strong unifying force that clarified the violation of women and the earth as part of the same drama of male control. The concept of eco-feminism uses the age-old connection between women and nature as a bridge to strengthen both the feminism and the ecological movements which seek to end the oppression of Women and Nature. Eco-feminism calls for an end to all oppressions. Eco-feminism connects the exploitation and domination of women with that of the environment, and argues that there is a connection between women and nature that comes from their shared history of oppression by a patriarchal Western society. Social eco-feminists insist that women are close to nature through their long-time social roles which are pregnancy, giving birth, raising children and doing housework. Cultural eco-feminism has been analyzed through the illustration of rape, menstruation and natural images in the novels. These illustrations emphasize women's femininity and the connections with nature. Through the kitchen in which the story takes place and the description of housework, the concept of social eco-feminism can be seen. Both Nature and Women are important themes in Toni Morrison's novels which provide the appropriateness of applying this theory to her novels.

Eco-feminist critique dualistic theory, oppose separation between man and nature, therefore, to solve the ecological crisis, building a harmonious world, we will build the women's movement, ethnic movements and ecological movement closely together. Eco-theology is a form of constructive theology that focuses on the interrelationships of religion and nature, particularly in the light of environmental concerns. Eco-theology generally starts from the premise that a relationship exists between human religious or

spiritual world views and the degradation of nature. It explores the interaction between ecological values, such as sustainability of the human domination of nature. The movement has produced numerous religious-environmental projects around the world. The main content of this paper is to analyze the ecological feminism factor in Toni Morrison's select novels from an eco-feminist perspective to reveal the significance of eco-feminism in the novel and evoke the reader's awareness of eco-feminism. This paper explores a new angle for the eco-feminist theory in terms of nature ecology, social ecology, cultural ecology and psychological ecology perspective with illustrating the eco-absence phenomenon in the white dominant culture and consequences from the perspective of natural, cultural and social ecology, then explores the underlying causes of the phenomenon from the psychological ecology perspective, and finally comes to the implicit eco-feminist spirituality in the novel: creating a multi-cultural harmonious world.

Toni Morrison is leading contemporary African American women writer in the 20th century, was the first black novelist to be awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993 for her *Beloved* has got more and more attention and recognition throughout the world. Her first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) is incredibly popular among readers since the publication. Her second novel *Sula* is the best one to represent her writing styles and thoughts of her. Her novels are known for their epic themes, vivid dialogue, and richly detailed characters. She is an American novelist, editor and professor. Morrison began writing fiction as part of an informal group of poets and writers at Howard who met to discuss their work. She wrote a short story about a black girl who longed to have blue eyes. In contemporary woman novelists of America, Toni Morrison is the rare one who thinks highly of nature in her works. Natural imagery in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* compares women destiny with nature, and uncovers the double pressures from white culture and men suffered by Negro women, criticizing ruling logic which gives oppression to Negro women and nature. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison offers a profound critique of codified and

institutionalized white language and ideology through the subversion of a school primer that privileges whiteness. The black family and community play a very important and dominating role in the black individual's life. Because of the lack of parents' love and irresponsibility of the community, Pecola loses her sanity, while with the love of their parents and the support from their family, Claudia and her sister Frieda grow up healthily. In *The Bluest Eye*, the black culture is portrayed mainly through the black blues and Aunt Jimmy's funeral. In *The Bluest Eye* Morrison is specifically connected with a particularly impalpable form of racist ideology that, because of its indefinable nature, is paradoxically more pervasive, psychologically damaging and difficult to contest than extreme and overt forms of racism. When Cholly Breedlove reduces his family to a state of homelessness, puts them all 'outdoors', Claudia, the now mature narrator, reflects upon her new awareness of the social, psychological and economic constraints on the black community. In the novel, Morrison is specifically connected with a particularly impalpable form of racist ideology that, because of its indefinable nature, is paradoxically more pervasive, psychologically damaging and difficult to contest than extreme and overt forms of racism. This novel depicts the comparison, relation, and state of Nature and Women. The novel is divided into the four seasons, but it pointedly refuses to meet the expectations of these seasons, but it pointedly refuses to meet the expectations of these seasons. For example, spring, the traditional time of rebirth and renewal, of new lights, colors and new ways reminds Claudia of being whipped with new switches, and it is the season when Pecola is raped. Pecola's baby dies in autumn, the season of harvesting. Morrison uses natural cycles to underline the unnaturalness and misery of her characters', especially female characters experiences. To some degree, she also questions the benevolence of nature, as when Claudia wonders whether; "The earth itself might have been unyielding", to someone like Pecola. Example of marigolds is also used by Morrison when Claudia and Frieda associate marigolds with the safety and well-being of Pecola's baby. Their ceremonial

offering of money and the remaining unsold marigold seeds represents an honest sacrifice on their part. They believe that if the marigolds they have planted grow, then Pecola's baby will be all right. More generally, marigolds represent the constant renewal of nature. In Pecola's case, this cycle of renewal is perverted by her father's rape of her. In the novel, Black children and women are exploited and seen as victims like the natural world in the hands of men. The following extract by Zora Neal Hurston, well illustrates this concept of domination. "*Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as ah been able tuh find out. May be it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but don't tote it. He hand it to his women folks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as ah can see*" (qtd. in Collins 52, emphasis original). Zora Neale Hurston's fiery passage indicates power and omnipotence of the white man who transfers his physical burden on to the Black man. The Black man then becomes the 'beast of burden'. He is forced to carry the load thrown down by the white man, but instead hands it over to the Black woman. The Black woman is then supposed to do the job left undone by man. Man considers himself to be more powerful than woman and boasts of his physical prowess. His supposed indomitable strength makes him the ruler of the world, then why does not he exhibit his strength in carrying his own burden? Why does he hand it over to women? This brings in the question of domination and subordination, violence and silence, oppressor and oppressed and the argument related to these have catered interest among ecofeminists who protest and resist such violence on the "other". Eco-feminist theorists like Carolyn Merchant, Ynestra King, Carol Bigwood, Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies, Mary Mellor and others resist this sort of continued domination of men over the disempowered groups such as women, children, the disabled, animals, nature and men of colour. Ynestra King argues in her essay "Healing the wounds: Feminism, Ecology and Nature/Culture Dualism" that "The ecological crises is related to the systems

of hatred of all that is natural and female by the white, male western formulators of philosophy, technology and death inventions" (qtd. in Madsen 23). This system of hatred, violence and suffering can be observed in the novel.

Sula is her second novel and the best to represent her writing style and technique. Through the narration of the fates of two typical black women Sula, and Nel, the novel demonstrates under the triple oppression of sexism, racialism and classism black women have experienced great hardships and misery in the process of searching for identity and struggling for freedom and equality. Sula and Nel are two Black young girls: clever and poor, together they grow up sharing their secrets, dreams and happiness. Then Sula moves away from the small-town community in the uplands of Ohio to roam the cities of America. Much has changed in the town when she returned ten years later, including Nel, who now has a husband and three children. The bottom is mostly the black community, situated in the hills above the mostly whites, the wealthier community of medallion. The Nature is being described very frequently in the novel. When Sula died, there is one more death, of nature, the Bottoms; a small hill is being transformed into a golf course by the Medallions. The nature is also seen as a destroyer when Nel says: "The river had killed them all. No more silver-gray flashes, no more flat, wide, unhurried look. No more slowing down of gills..." (pg174). Morrison shattered the stereotypical image of black women and addresses her with strength, wisdom, and rebellious spirit of exploring themselves. There is an extrinsic relation and comparison between nature and female characters shown by the author. Birds, flowers, fire and most importantly water is very much associated with sula and other characters as well. Birds invoke the idea of flight, which makes sense when we consider that Cecile and Sula both flee at some point in the story. When we meet Rochelle, she wears a "canary-yellow dress" and has the "glare of a canary". And we already know that a "plague of robins" arrives in Medallion just before Sula goes and robins are often associated with the spring, the season of rebirth and growth. Sula has a birthmark shaped like a rose, and "The Rose Tattoo" is the source of the novel's

epigraph. These particular flowers are beautiful and fragrant, even intoxicating. Rochelle intoxicates the young Nel, and Sula intoxicates the many men around her. These characters are also a little dangerous in that they disrupt the lives of the people they encounter. But the thing about flowers is, once they're picked, they don't live for very long. Just as the flower's beauty is fleeting, so too is the presence of both of these women in the novel. Water is often associated with death in the novel. For Sula, it represents Chicken's horrible drowning. Fire might be a cleansing force, but water engulfs and consumes the young boy. Water doesn't comfort Sula but rather agitates and upsets her because of her responsibility for Chicken's death. At the end of the novel, one of the townspeople who die in the tunnel slides and hits the ice below.

In her 1987 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Beloved*, Toni Morrison takes up a remarkably diverse set of historical and cultural ideas and quilts them together into an affective narrative. Morrison's story follows Sethe, a mother and escaped slave who murders her young daughter in a fit of mercy, madness, and love when the family's capture and return to the plantation at Sweet Home seems imminent. Sethe and her surviving daughter, Denver, are haunted not only psychologically by the lingering reality of slavery as an institution but physically by the baby's ghost itself. When a strange young woman named Beloved sweeps into their lives, these two haunting realities collide to create a multileveled, unique experience in historical fiction. The novel follows Sethe, a free woman in post-Civil War Ohio, who fights to suppress the horrific memories of her enslaved life on the Sweet Home plantation in Kentucky and battles with the guilt of having killed her first-born daughter, whose violent ghost still haunts the family's new home at 124 Bluestone Road. Denver, traumatized by the baby ghost and is a product of the anxious environment her mother's fear has fostered, becomes introspective and friendless, save for her mother and the baby ghost. Both women live in complacent isolation at 124 Bluestone Road until an old friend of Sethe's from Sweet Home, a former slave named Paul D, arrives. Sethe and Paul D. attempt to kindle a romantic relationship, but the baby ghost seethes

with anger at the intrusion and Paul D. is forced to exorcise it from the house. He succeeds, but just as a hope for future happiness in familial love emerges for the three characters, a young woman appears on their doorstep. Sleepy, sickly, soaked with water, and able only to recollect her name, Beloved changes the course of Sethe, Denver, and Paul D.'s lives immediately. The baby ghost incarnate and so much more, she challenges Paul D. and Denver to delve into their respective pasts while ultimately forcing Sethe to confront her own. *Beloved* is ornate, dense, and, like all of Toni Morrison's fiction, it is as undeniably beautiful as it is socially and politically conscious. This demonstrates how Morrison, through her allusion to the Catholic Holy Trinity, unites three separate psychological remnants of slavery into one cohesive commentary on African American consciousness, and explore how she uses this Trinitarian understanding to address the revision of civil rights implied by a negligent Reagan administration and Rehnquist Court in the 1980s. The Trinitarian reading of *Beloved*, as an intellectually rewarding complement to studying the novel with the traditional postmodern trinity of race, class, and gender in mind, will also illuminate her evocative closing message that "this is not a story to pass on."

Denominational conceptions of the Trinity differ, and there are several ways this symbol can be portrayed in fiction depending on which religious doctrine the author identifies with. Perhaps previous research has skirted Morrison's allusion to the Trinity due to the ambiguous nature of this dogmatic principle and the idea that Morrison's legitimate association with a specific strain of religious faith must be established in order to discuss her use of the Holy Trinity in *Beloved*. This is the conception of the Holy Trinity that Morrison uses in her novel: she applies the richness of her characters over the framework of these three expressions of God that are all equally, at once, and always one God. This is not to say that Morrison takes the Catholic Holy Trinity and inserts it point-blank into her novel with little or no adjustment; her penchant for wedding established literary symbols to African American culture does not allow such a concise explanation. Her simple adoption of the Trinity, in itself, is an ode

to the African American tradition. A basic understanding of this illogical mystery of faith is necessary to fully appreciate the way in which Morrison references it, and theologian Fr. Leonard Feeney provides a concise explanation with water as his example: liquid water, mineral ice, and water vapor are all at once water. They are never anything but formula H₂O, and their separate forms are but varied expressions of an identical substance, just as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are separate selves natural to one entity.

Various themes have been explored by the author as, racial discrimination, women friendship, marriage and sex, self growth, evil and goodness etc. Morrison's eco-feminist concern for nature has seldom been studied. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* shows the history of African American women's views of nature and how the institution of slavery fractured African American relationships with the environment and rendered nature as a place of conflict for slaves. In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison, through excavating the relationship between female and nature from the peculiar angle of a woman writer, demonstrates the strong desire of black women to get rid of the miserable fate of slavery and pursue liberation and independence. In this novel Morrison shows the victimized status of both women and nature. In the world of *Beloved*, trees serve primarily as sources of healing, comfort, and life. Morrison enhances the world of *Beloved* by investing it with a supernatural dimension as well. These novels show the recovery of black people under the guidance of nature. Morrison, being a black woman writer, in her novels, shows her concern for and reflection about the destiny of the black women, the African-American culture and their communities. Eco-feminists talk about the relation of women and nature. Thus, the eco-feminist perspective show Morrison's eco-feminist consciousness and explore the deep literary value of the novels.

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- interested in teaching language studies like Linguistics, phonetics, communication skills especially in soft skills. She has updated her qualification with M.A in Mass Communication & Journalism, B.Ed & M.A in Hindi, M.A in Linguistics, M.A in Translation studies and MBA in Human Resource Management. She has published more than 28 articles in various reputed journals and books with ISBN. She has received silver medal titled as the Young Researcher Award for the best research paper presentation in the International Conference on Classical Literature: East and West organised by Alagappa University and Centre of Excellence for Classical Tamil on March 2008. She has also participated and presented 35 research papers in various National and International seminars/conferences.

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Dr.S.Karthika, awarded her Ph.D degree in 2013 in British Literature from Alagappa University, Karaikudi, Tamilnadu, India. She did her M.A & M.Phil in English from the same University with university first rank and fifth rank respectively. She is now working as Assistant Professor in Sri Parasakthi College for Women, Courtallam, Tamilnadu since 2009. Her area of specialization is in British Literature and Commonwealth literature. Her area of interest in research is ethnic studies, gender studies, diasporic literature, and all the post colonial literatures. Apart from literature she is also