



SITUATING ECOFEMINISM IN TONI MORRISON'S *THE BLUEST EYE*

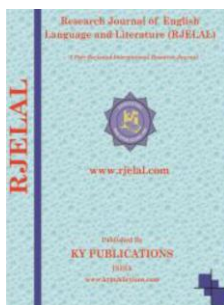
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ABSTRACT

Ecofeminism constitutes one of the fundamental features of Ecocriticism/Ecological Study in postcolonial discourse. It is primarily intended to study/examine the connections between women and nature with special emphasis on their unavoidable interconnectedness with environment. From the postcolonial perspective, it can also be viewed as an attempt to address the issue of subjugation of women, nature and environment with special reference to environmental injustices as against preservation of Environmental Ethics. Rousseau's concept of environmental ethics can be correlated with the concept of environmental justice which is more explicitly linked to racial politics- the reason why scholars tend to emphasize environmental racism in African American fiction with special reference to Toni Morrison. Ecofeminism is grounded upon the conception that the ideology which recommends oppression of women on the basis of race, class, gender, sexuality etc. is exactly the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature. Women, environment and nature are therefore, three important segments of ecofeminism. In the light of the above, The present paper purports to examine Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* through ecofeminist lens by mostly concentrating on the ideals of Ecofeminism.

Key Words: Ecofeminism, Ecocritical Analysis, Women and Ecology, Anthropocentric

Ecofeminism constitutes one of the fundamental features of Ecocriticism/Ecological Criticism which was spearheaded by the French feminist Francoise d'Eaubonne. Eaubonne focuses on the interconnection(s) between women and nature which encourages, in an extended sense, the interconnectedness of man and environment thereby facilitating social and environmental justice/ethics with special emphasis on women and nature. Eaubonne coined the term "ecofeminism" in 1974 (*Earthcare* 5) to bring to the fore the vital fact that the urbanized and

industrialized male-dominated society of science and technology has reduced the 'fertility of earth', which has been associated with sacred significance in Greek and Indian mythology. In terms of juxtaposition, the fertility of earth can be taken in close proximity to the fertility of 'woman'- the quintessence of beauty, love, marriage and fertility. Ecofeminism therefore suggests that both nature and women should be adulated and respected rather than exploited, tortured and hegemonized by patriarchy, male ego and dynamics of power precisely because they

constitute the fountain source of sustenance on the earth- beauty, love, fertility, procreation and environmental consciousness/ethics. To be more precise, Ecofeminists tend to emphasize the fact that ecological/environmental issues are inevitably related to the issues of women and children, who largely suffer the devastating consequences of environmental pollution and destruction. The most radical Ecofeminists are designated as 'Cultural Ecofeminists' who tend to opine that women have a natural ability to save the world from ecological crisis because women are closer to nature. They are of the opinion that the white western male is to be blamed for their ruthless attitude and aggressive onslaught on nature and environment. While interrogating the destructive effects of science, technology and other forms of masculine progress, cultural Ecofeminists often recommend a return to 'goddess worship' and celebrate woman's particular spiritual connections to the natural world (*Earthcare* 11). For instance, Carol P. Christ in *Diving Deep and Surfacing: Women Writers on Spiritual Quest* (1995) suggests that some kind of "mystical awakening in nature" can provide women "with images of their own power"(119).

To begin with Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) one wonders at destructive effects and obsessions of 'the white standards of beauty' in the USA of the 1940s on the self-image of Pecola Breedlove – an African American female despised by her parents for her ugliness. Viewed from ecofeminist perspective, Pecola's rape by her father, Cholly Breedlove signifies the destruction of nature by human beings which is evident from the unsprouting of the marigold flowers. The flowers never grow because the damage done to Pecola by patriarchal oppression and racist hegemony leads to 'nature destroyed and annihilated'(162). Pecola laments that the beautiful 'dandelions' are unfortunately uprooted on the false ground that "they are ugly"(37). Her association with the wild weeds called 'dandelions'infact points to Morrison's engaging interest in restoring natural landscape and 'Wilderness Ethics.' To Pecola the dandelions look

beautiful and she cannot understand "why people call them weeds?" (35). What is pertinent to observe here is Morrison's sharp understanding about different forms of oppression experienced by women on the one hand and nature on the other. Pecola is an African American female despised by her parents and the society. This shows that Pecola has no 'free space' either at home dominated by the blacks or in the society dominated by the white Americans. The condition of Pecola can be correlated with the exploitation and mutilation of the natural world which is symbolically presented in the novel *The Bluest Eye* through two powerful symbols of flower.

Significantly, the novel begins with the image of marigold flower and unfortunately ends symbolically with the failure of marigold which in fact points to violation of women and onslaught on nature. The interconnectedness between women and nature is succinctly shown in the following lines from the novel: "the flowers never grew because the damage done to pecola was 'total' since Pecola's nature is destroyed and annihilated" (162). At the same time behind Pecola's appreciation of the beauty of dandelions once again vindicates the natural relationship between women and nature. She laments that people fail to understand the inner beauty of the dandelions and therefore belittle them as weeds just as Pecola is belittled by being raped and branded as ugly. However, Pecola understood that people call the dandelion weeds and did not mind uprooting them on the basis that they are ugly and unimportant: "They are ugly. They are weeds" (37). It may be further noted that in the tamed garden of Mrs. Dunion, all natural wild plants are destroyed and their very destruction creates a conflict between ruthless civilization and biotic elements on the one hand and the anthropocentric vision of the whites on the other. It is this wider gap between men and nature that causes great harm to a balanced ecosystem which is grounded upon an amicable relationship between men, the biotic and the abiotic elements of the world of nature. Metaphorically speaking, Pecola epitomizes freedom and wilderness of the

natural world which is strongly reminiscent of Rousseau's wilderness ethics that has been defeated by the drunken world of civilization signified by Pecola's drunken father who raped her.

The Bluest Eye therefore bears a brilliant testimony to the fact that the natural world of sanity, serenity and ethical soundness is destroyed by the chaotic insanity and drunkenness of the so called civilized world. Needless to say the natural world in Morrison's novel is intruded upon by anthropocentric vision of the modern and postmodern man. In the aftermath of the two disastrous World Wars the very destruction of earth has become a sure metaphor of rape of earth and of Pecola. Both earth and Pecola are suppressed and oppressed by the bondage of patriarchy and gender hegemony. Viewed in an extended perspective, Pecola's innocence despite her ugliness and helplessness is nothing but nature's innocence characterized by primeval beauty and pristine purity. At the same time Pecola's body can be correlated with the natural landscape which is violated by the marathon conquest of civilization and the modern man.

Apart from 'dandelions,' Morrison has made a mention of 'marigold,' 'grass' and 'rivers' which stand for the endangered natural world. Morrison's environmental consciousness has come to the fore in the first part of the novel in which Claudia, the girl narrator talks about the beautiful ravine which is polluted and dumped with waste from the Zick's Coal Company at the industrial town of Ohio. While she and her sister walk back from school, they "glance back to see the great carloads of slag being dumped, red hot and smoking, into the ravine that skirts the steel mill" (5). Any sensitive observer will feel "a shiver when his feet leave the gravel path and sink into the dead grass in the field" (5). It is now evident that the dead marigolds coupled with the dead grass in the field and the river dumped with waste materials have become symbols of man's intrusion into the biotic natural set up. The fall of the natural world also becomes metaphoric representation of women's degradation and

denigration. For instance, Pauline finds peace and hope in the real town of Kentucky, whereas she is filled with remorse and loneliness and struggles like a mule to maintain her family in the industrial city of Ohio.

Last but not the least, *The Bluest Eye* brings to the fore the vital fact that the earth, the seasons, the purity and serenity of the natural world have all been vitiated by anthropocentric aggrandizement of the human world and the complex material civilization. Just as the earth and the seasons do not function in the natural way, Pecola too has lost her virginity and free space. The destruction of all wild natural plants points to the fact that civilization, urbanization and technology have done great harm to the preservation of landscape which is strongly reminiscent of Catherine Gardner's idea of Environmental Justice (204). Environmental justice is nevertheless useful in augmenting ecological issues with special reference to urban landscape and environmental racism that points to the conflict between civilization and biotic community on the one hand and to the conflict between black beauty represented by Pecola and the white anthropocentric attitude of people that causes a great harm to the balanced ecosystem. Needless to say, Pecola stands for the wilderness of the natural world which is strongly reminiscent of Rousseau's idea of "wilderness ethics" that emphasizes naturalness, freedom, spontaneity, noble savagery, and pristine purity untrammelled by artificiality, complexity and environmental pollution caused by the maddening world of civilization. Significantly, both Pecola and her father, Cholly Breedlove symbolically stand for two poles apart. Whereas, the father epitomizes the ills and wounds of the complex civilization, the daughter stands for wilderness and naturalness and her rape serves as an extended metaphor for the rape of nature and environment by civilization and the anthropocentric modern man.

In the novel under question the spring season neither brings joy nor hope. Even as it is a season of hope, colourful imagination and creative exuberance, it ironically signifies depression of

winter which points to an apocalypse in the cycle of seasons. 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*, Morrison brings to the fore onslaught on nature and total destruction of the environment. At the same time the novelist drives home the point that the rape of Pecola is in fact the rape of the earth. *The Bluest Eye* is thus a brilliant novel which demands an interesting ecofeminist study in which Mary Mellor’s observation that ecofeminism as a movement problematises the “connection between the exploitation and the degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women”(1) stands vindicated.

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