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Ecofeminism in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

Madhushri Kallimani

Ecofeminism:

Ecofeminism is a philosophical and political theory and a movement which combines ecological concerns with feminist ones regarding both as resulting from male domination of society. It reveals the relationship of woman and nature where woman synonyms with nature in aspects like childbirth and creation, moods and seasons, fertility, silence and symbolic protests. Ecofeminists begin with gender as a category of analysis. A feminist approach uses gender analysis as the starting point and gender is the lens through which the initial description and analysis occur. Ecofeminists highlight claims about women as women in their discussions of interconnected systems of unjustified domination. But this is not because gender oppression is more important than the other forms of oppression. It is because a focus on women reveals important features of interconnected systems of human domination. First, among white people, people of color, poor people, children, the elderly and colonized or third world people and other human groups harmed by environmental destruction, it is often women who suffer disproportionately higher risks and harms than men. Second, often female gender roles overlap with a particular environmental issue in a way that male gender roles do not. Third, some of the western ideologies that underlie the conception and domination of nature are gender biased in ways that are distinct from other sorts of bias discussed in. So, in order to unpack specific gender features of human systems of domination, ecofeminists often focus on women. Thus, while many feminists agree that ecology is a feminist issue, they differ over the nature and desirability of ecofeminism. Ecofeminism is based on certain fundamental claims that point to the existence of important connections between the oppression of women and oppression of nature. It is essential to understand the nature of these connections in order to understand the oppression of women and nature and finally every feminist theory must include an ecological perspective and vice versa. Ecofeminist theory has brought into sharp focus the links between development and gender. It has highlighted the fact that the violence against nature and against women is built into the dominant development model. Ecofeminist literature portrays the historical exploitation and domination of women and nature as going hand in hand, and both are seen as victims of development. It is evident that any harm to nature harms women equally, since women are considered closer to nature than men.

Ecofeminism and *The Bluest Eye*:

Ecofeminists have offered a number of approaches for understanding the present functioning of global oppression. One of them is patriarchal religion. The origin of oppression of nature began well before the scientific revolution, when shift from goddess-worshipping cultures to male deities began. In the goddess religions, both the earth and woman's fertility were seen as sacred. There was no gender hierarchy and divinity was seen as immanent. Women were compared to fields which would gestate and bear the male seed. With the advent of patriarchal religions there was a shift from goddess-centered cultures to male deities. The patriarchal domination of both nature and woman was divinely commanded. According to another theory, a woman's reproductive capacity and life bearing activities stood in a sharp contrast to the death oriented

activities of male culture. The phrases like ‘the rape of the nature’, ‘mother nature’ and ‘virgin forests’ feminized nature and woman. Ecofeminists claim that environmental issues are feminist issues because it is women and children who are the first to suffer the consequences of injustice and environmental destruction. Ecofeminists are also equally concerned with environmental racism defined as ‘the dumping or placement of environmentally hazardous substances or facilities in the communities of color around the world, primarily because of the race and powerlessness of people in those communities.

The novel, *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison is an epitome of all the concepts mentioned above like patriarchy, reproduction and environmental racism. The novel mirrors issues and theories like rejection, beauty, love, sex, racism, feminism and eco-feminism. It expresses the theme of disruption and unnatural disturbances of seasons connected to Pecola’s [a girl child and the protagonist] life. It is a tale of a black girl obsessed with a pair of blue eyes who is a victim of racial rejection. The novel focuses about being hated and resistance to contempt of others by the most vulnerable and delicate member of the society, a girl child. The text is divided into four seasons of autumn, winter, spring, summer and portrays disorder.

The novel is based on themes like disordered lives, disorder of seasons, unyielding earth and forbidden sex. It opens with a botanical aberration, a skip, in the natural order of things. The opening provides the stroke that announces something more than a secret shared, but a silence broken, a void filled, an unspeakable thing spoken at last. It reveals aspects connected to eco-feminism like exploitation of female by the male, childbirth, creation and domination of patriarchal society. The novel brings out a similarity between Pecola and Earth, her disordered life and disordered seasons, barren and unyielding Pecola and Earth. It draws connection between a minor destabilization in seasonal flora and the insignificant destruction of a black girl. The disorder of seasons here is linked to the disorders of Pecola’s life. The opening phrase of the novel ‘Quiet as its kept’ reveals a shocking information. As the marigolds did not bloom in the season of fall, Claudia the child narrator narrates that ‘it was because Pecola was having her father’s baby that the marigolds did not grow’. There is a speculation on the disruption of nature as being a social disruption with tragic individual consequences. The earth stops yielding and so does Pecola. The shattered world of Pecola is held together by the seasons. The seasons reversely react to the annihilated life of Pecola. But for the world and society it becomes a mere insignificant issue.

The Earth and Pecola:

Ecofeminism’s central claim is that it is no longer possible to discuss environmental change without addressing social change. Moreover it is not possible to address women’s oppression without addressing environmental degradation. That these two worlds, the human and the natural are inextricably interconnected, may seem so obvious that it’s hard to imagine that they are usually addressed separately. Earth and nature symbolize woman and her femininity. As a woman experiences menstruation, fertility, childbirth and creation, earth too creates and changes according to the seasons. Earth and woman are synchronic and are exploited and harassed by the male domination. Though it is evident that both earth and woman are quiet as they are kept, the fight and protest of them is symbolic and destructive.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola is a black girl rejected and disliked for her ugliness, who goes insane craving for blue eyes which symbolize beautiful life, acceptance and love. This unfortunate girl

is condemned by her mother, harassed and exploited by the white boys and girls and brutally raped by her father. There is no meaning in her existence and life is all chaos and disorder for her. She is introduced by her friend Claudia, the child narrator of the novel in a shockingly bewildering way. The very striking paragraph in the beginning provides the stroke that announces something more than a secret shared, an unspeakable thing spoken at last. It signifies the end of the novel and summarizes the complete story of Pecola and the reasons for her ruin. To quote,

“Quiet as it’s kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father’s baby that the marigolds did not grow. A little examination and much less melancholy would have proved to us that our seeds were not the only ones that did not sprout; nobody’s did. It was a long time before my sister and I admitted to ourselves that no green was going to spring from our seeds. For years I thought my sister was right: it was my fault. I had planted them too far down in the earth. It never occurred to either of us that the earth itself might have been unyielding. 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. Our innocence and faith were no more productive than his lust and despair. What is clear now is that of all of that hope, fear, lust, love and grief, nothing remains but Pecola and the unyielding earth”. [4]

The above paragraph describes the reason for marigolds not blossoming that year and that it was because Pecola was having her father’s baby. The reason is quite absurd, bizarre and wild. No sign of green or life is seen around. The earth and Pecola are barren and deserted. The rape of Pecola represents the rape of earth. Though the seeds are dropped in the plot of black dirt of earth and Pecola’s womb, they fail to be productive and fruitful. The innocence and faith of Claudia and Frieda are destroyed by the lust and despair of Pecola’s father. The seeds were planted too down in the earth, so deep that they died of suffocation. There was no air of love and freedom for them. No sign of green or life would spring from the seeds planted in the womb of earth and Pecola. The beginning of the novel justifies the end and the conclusion that, of all that hope, fear, lust, love and grief nothing remains but death and hopelessness.

Seasons and the *Moirai* of lives:

The novel is divided into four seasons namely autumn, winter, spring and summer. It begins with autumn and ends with summer. The seasons and the lives of characters in the novel go hand in hand. The season fall here implies the fall of life. The autumn season in the novel denotes sorrow and love, while Frieda sings ‘when the deep purple falls over sleepy garden walls, someone thinks of me’. Autumn symbolizes productive and fructifying pain. Claudia turns nostalgic with warm memories of love like the alaga syrup which coated her chest and soothed the pain. She remembers how, when she had cold and cough someone entered the room, corrected the flannel and rested hands on her forehead. So when she thinks of autumn, she thinks of those hands who don’t want her to die. The reference to dandelions in the novel reveals the inner thoughts of Pecola. She observes the cherished and loved images of dandelions. She wonders why they are treated as mere weeds and not as flowers. The dandelions were considered to be ugly and not pretty enough to be grown in the garden and so pulled off. Her experience of inexplicable shame and rejection is expressed through dandelions. She looks at them affectionately but she does not receive the same. She concludes by assuming herself as a mere ugly weed.

‘A dart of affection leaps out from her to them. But they do not look at her and do not send love back. She thinks, “They *are* ugly. They *are* weeds.” [37]

The season also reflects that there were no marigolds and the seeds sown by Claudia and Frieda did not sprout. The earth did not yield. The seeds shriveled and died and Pecola’s baby too. It also describes their house, Pecola’s mother and father and their relationship and Sammy, her brother. This part also throws light on how all of them wore a cloak of ugliness and tolerated themselves. It is in this season Pecola begins craving for blue eyes.

The next season winter opens with a description of Claudia’s father. His facial features are compared to the season. He is a cold man lacking warmth. Winter has permanently settled in his face. His snowy eyes threaten to avalanche, his bent eyebrows are like leafless trees or obsolete with no expression. His skin is yellow and pale and his head frozen with darkness. Winter was also a season of stiffened hateful knot for Claudia, Frieda and Pecola. They waited for spring. But the knot was loosened and disrupted by a new girl in the school named ‘Maureen Peal’. She is considered as a disrupter of seasons and compared to spring season. Maureen’s beauty had the power to disturb and alter the seasonal moods. This season also draws attention to Pecola’s school life and humiliations.

The season spring has a strange connection with the lives of Pecola, Claudia and Frieda. As Claudia explains, spring meant a change in whipping style. They are beaten differently. They are whipped by the twigs which are thin, green and unbreakable. This season reminds her of painful whippings and new green switches that lost their sting long after the whipping was over. The spring season can be defined as the important one as there are many incidents connected to it. Pecola’s mother Pauline and father Charles Breedlove and their breaking married life are discussed here. It is in this thin light of spring that Pecola is raped by her father.

The summer symbolizes tightness of strawberry, dust, lowering skies, storms, parched days, sticky nights. But it’s mostly the storms, the violent sudden storms which frightened Claudia, when she thinks of summer. The line ‘seasons become the Moirai of our lives’ represents seasons as the fates of their small lives. The unnaturalness of seasons reveals the unnaturalness and disordered fates and lives. This season also portrays how people rejected Pecola who was doomed to death and how she was found amidst the marginalized garbage. It’s only Claudia and Frieda who prayed for Pecola’s baby. They planted the seeds and said magic words for the baby. But the baby dies. Pecola is maddened with blue eyes and assumes and hallucinates that she has blue eyes.

At the end of the novel, the main statement gets reverse as Claudia mentions ‘I talk about how I did not plant the seeds too deeply’, where as in the beginning she claimed that she had planted them too far down in the earth. In the conclusion it is realized by Claudia that it was the fault of the earth and not of the seeds. That year the entire earth was hostile to the marigolds. The earth had rejected certain kinds of seeds and flowers. It failed to bear fruits. But when earth itself rejects, one has to verdict that victim or seeds had no right to live. Victims are blamed to be wrong. But it was too late to matter and too late to be grown, at least on the edge or at the end of the city among the garbage where the seeds were assassinated. So it was an autumn, a spring, a winter and a summer, all without the happening of them. It is believed that when something forbidden happens, the nature reacts to it by being hazardous. A daughter being raped by her father and pregnant with her father’s baby was the most forbidden sin. As a reaction and result

the earth stops yielding. It backgrounds the illicit, traumatic and incomprehensible sex coming to its dreaded fruition. The readers are sure to be bewildered and stunned. The way the novel is narrated by Claudia not only touches the reader but also moves them into tears. Thus the unspeakable thing is spoken and it is no more 'quiet as it's kept'.

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