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Toni Morrison's *Beloved* & *Sula*: An Eco- Critical Study

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Abstract:

Eco-writings gives a new dimension to the green revolution and conservation movement that could put a halt to the apocalypse. The environmentalist has shown concern on the fast growing population, overutilization of natural resources, cutting trees, building industries, burning forests, constructing buildings and dams and its impact to humans as a whole. Literature can be read from the natures perspective of which human nature relations plays a vital role. Toni Morrison through her writings believes in preserving the history to modify the present, in order to secure the future. Morrison's novel *Sula* and *Beloved* shows various perceptions of this human-nature relationship and their complex connection with nature that led to their submissive nature and their power to survive the catastrophe and evils that were inflicted on them by the surrounding environment. Nature not only serves as a background to Morrison's *Sula* and *Beloved*, but is more like a living being that reacts to the human exploitation. Morrison works rather reflects an ecological literacy among the readers. Novels of Toni Morrison speak about men's victimization of nature, which in a way led to all kind of catastrophe. Nature serves as imagery in the novels of Morrison. Nature and women are both the victims of men's oppression, prejudice and the practices of inequality. The eco-feminist interventions presented in these novels seek towards a global peace in order to create a harmonious world. The paper tries to draw the parallel of human domination over the female body where exploitation is a common theme. Though literature does not serve the purpose to overcome the man-made trouble but certainly can create an awareness of ecological wisdom to understand the environment in a better way.

Keywords: anthropocentrism, annihilation, discrimination, ecosystem, marginalization.

INTRODUCTION:

The history is a witness that there is absolutely no movement that addresses black women. Black women have always faced the environmental racism as they were deeply rooted in

nature and environment. There has been extremely no recognition of the work by black women which in a way gives us to rethink about environmental justice where race and sex have never played a vital role though they were the ones who suffered in the whole process. The two movements like "the mainstream environmental movement" and "the environmental justice movement" have excluded the black women's standpoint. Therefore, there is a need for a black feminist environmental movement with specific reference to environmental racism in order to survive in this uncanny yet wonderful environment. Environmental racism has affected the communities in general and the families in particular. The women character in Morrison novel *Sula* and *Beloved* can be seen as a subject of environmental racism. The black women experience can never be correlated to any other feminist in order to combat the threats of environmental racism towards the black women. Thus, the perception of black women is utterly significance.

Morrison's *Sula* and *Beloved* shows different facets of the ecosystem, parallel to the experience of being black and, their belongingness to the roots and existence in America. These novels investigate the complex connections between the Afro-Americans and the Mother Nature. When the Afro-Americans left the African continents, they carried the spores from their land in the form of cultural and spiritual values. These values intact them to their roots and soil, that connect them to nature in a passionate way. "If there were no black people here in this country, it would have been Balkanized". (Draper 232) The novels explore the exploitation of black American by the white equivalent to exploitation of nature by man. The blacks get psychological wound due to power, cruelty and segregation applied on them, similar to the misuse of the ecosystem by man. The attachment of the blacks to their belongings and their submissive nature has been manipulated by the whites to enslave them.

In the same way after the anchoring of 'Mayflower', the virgin land is coveted as a money-orientated source by the Pilgrims and the long process of self-centeredness has led to its exploitation. The Pilgrims during their early settlement in the harbor of Plymouth succeeded in celebrating their first harvest feast. Gradually, their economy flourished with the availability of favorable atmosphere for growing crops, abundant supply of drinking water, tranquil anchorage for ship and neighborhood to built houses. The pilgrims built a town ship near the Plymouth and mutually signed a treaty with the Wampanoag leader, to maintain peace and harmony. The availability of bondage labor from the African continents was an advantage for the whites as they were easily available and adoptable to the new surroundings. The white Puritans got huge profit by selling tobacco and black's as chattel slaves. As the Puritans were the paradigm of law and order, so the first colonial law was passed in 1630, to establish the institution of slavery. They believed themselves to be superior and claimed the black male, black female, and their children as chattel slaves. This belief of superiority came in the mind of American's from the biblical account of the creation in which God said that "Let us make the man (...) have dominion over the fish of the sea (...) over all the earth." (Genesis 1:26)

A BRIEF SURVEY OF ECOCRITICISM:

The 17th century Plymouth turns into the barren wilderness of 21st century's contemporary life. The one-hundred and two Pilgrims who started their cruise in search of a New World out of the wilderness in their famous ship "Mayflower" signed the "Mayflower compact" with mutual understanding to maintain peace and harmony but forgot to sign a compact against misuse of Mother Nature. John Carver, the first Governor of the New England colony couldn't survive the nature's aggression, but still, the survival of the fittest was considered the toughest. Since, man believes that everything in the universe moves in and around him and whatever he does is logically correct, gave rise to anthropocentrism. The idealistic belief of human being, that he is central to the universe and is the most precious creations can be considered as the key reason to apocalypse and negligence towards the Mother Earth. "What would the world be, once bereft Of wet and wildness? Let them be left, O let them be left, wildness and wet; Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet." (Hopkins) The carelessness of centuries has given rise to various natural calamities and global warming. Though the awareness has started after the warning of the preservationist but has not been completely successful. The environmentalist believes that Mother Earth should be respected and not taken for granted. These thinking lead to writings about the apocalypse of earth, that the natural resources should be preserved and stopped from further damage. Such writings added a new direction to the ecological movements which created a worldwide awareness to the threatening degradation of the earth's surface, natural resources, and biodiversity.

Recently, the world literary activists have taken a stand against ecological exploitation on a first priority basis. The non-fiction *A Sand County Almanac* of Aldo Leopold's published in 1949 and *Silent Spring* of Rachel Carson's in 1962 have greatly influenced the American Conservation movement and Ecological movement. These influential books changed the outlook of the Western countries towards the carelessness done to the ecosystem and environment. It also detailed the need for concern arising from the harmful effect of chemical pesticides on wildlife in and outside water. Since patriarchy is prevailing in the Western civilization from time immemorial and the prejudice against ecology is correlated with gender discrimination. The amalgam of earth with female both in life and literature is from the ancient times. This fusion of earth with the female is another facet of eco-warriors, who believe that root cause behind both is patriarchy. The eco-warriors are the activists who believe that issues of green politics and feminism are related to each other as both suffer from the unethical control of man over them, so they coined the term eco-feminist to the problems of an ecosystem. The term Ecofeminism was given to capture the sense that because of their biological connection to the earth and lunar cycles, women are natural advocates of environmentalism.

"In this country, American means white. Everybody else has to hyphenate." (Morrison) Morrison's character in her novel both natural and unnatural includes the concept and concern of the American society where the marginalized could be female, black or fragile ecology. "I do not

want to bow out with easy answers to complex questions. It's the complexity of how people behave under duress that is of interest to me (McKay 1983:420)." (Uma 7) Although Morrison protagonist is black women, still she does not want her works to be labeled in the category of feminism. Her novels can be discussed from different angles and perspective: "In order to be as free as I possibly can, in my own imagination, I can't take positions that are closed. Everything I've ever done, in the writing world, has been to expand articulation, rather than to close it, to open doors, sometimes, not even closing the book leaving the endings open for reinterpretation, revisitation, a little ambiguity(...)I don't subscribe to patriarchy, and I don't think it should be substituted with matriarchy." (Jaffrey)

Objectives:

- To substantiate the hypothesis how women can blend with nature for their major betterment.
- To explore the complex identity of humans in relation to the environment.
- To explain how the human domination over the environment is synonymous to the male domination over female.
- To ensure that the outcome of the study creates an ecological wisdom through the text of Morrison's black experience.

SULA: AN ECOCIDE

Morrison's *Sula*, a year after the end of World War I, the serene atmosphere of the Bottom is still preserved from the nuisance of city life. The Bottom was "just a neighborhood where on quiet days people in valley houses could hear singing sometimes, banjos sometimes, and, if a valley man happened to have business up in those hills-collecting rent or insurance payments-he might see a dark woman in a flowered dress doing a bit of cakewalk, a bit of black bottom, a bit of "messing around" to the lively notes of a mouth organs." (*Sula* 4) The story starts ironically, with a joke that includes the cheating of a black slave by his white master and the area on top of the mountain is called the Bottom. "A joke. A nigger joke. That was the way it got started. Not the town, of course, but that part of the town where the Negroes lived, the part they called the Bottom in spite of the fact that it was up in the hills. Just a nigger joke." (*Sula* 4) The white master duped his black slave telling it the place, God sees when he looks down from heaven and the slave believed his master and took the land as the bottom of heaven. As the blacks of Medallion were far away from the materialistic world and kept themselves busy in the varied world of nature and culture. "They were mightily preoccupied with earthly things and each other." (*Sula* 6) This down to earth behaviour of the blacks kept them close and similar to the environment where both are equally oppressed by the whites and men. *Sula* portrays and compares the exploitation of black and destruction of biosphere with the harmful effects of industrialization and urbanization. The World War I is linked to Shadrack's National Suicide Day and his mental unsteadiness. "All their repugnance was contained in the neat balance of the

triangles-a balance that soothed him, transferred some of its equilibrium to him." (*Sula* 8) The black people of Medallion never played with nature as the dominant, or tried to twist nature according to their own necessity. They believed in the power of nature and respected it. They never took life or death for granted. Though they feared evil-doer, but never tried to annihilate them. They try to be acquainted with the crisis and survive it. They blamed Sula for all ruins and being evil but never tried to kill her. "What was taken by outsiders to be slackness, slovenliness or even generosity was in fact a full recognition of the legitimacy of forces other than good ones. They did not believe doctors could heal-for them, none ever had done so. They did not believe death was accidental-life might be, but death was deliberate. They did not believe Nature was ever askew-only inconvenient. Plague and drought were as "natural" as springtime. If milk could curdle, God knows robins could fall." (*Sula* 90)

The protagonist Sula did not want to bind by any societal codes of politeness prevalent in the black community. She was stunningly unconventional as her life was of unlimited experiment. She rebelled against the societal norms and became a pariah of her community towards the end. "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself." (*Sula* 92) The novel proceeds with the friendship of Sula and Nel, who found in each other the fulfillment of time and society. But after Chicken Little's accidental death, silence and emptiness developed between them. Sula felt alienated as she had always clung to Nel as the best thing in the world around her, so after Nel's marriage she left Medallion to the town for further higher education. In those ten years, she had shifted her focus from being alone to frequent lovemaking, and then gradual detaching from her partners. And these ten years of education and freedom had not made her altruistic. "There, in the centre of that silence was not eternity but the death of time and a loneliness so profound the word itself had no meaning" (*Sula* 123). Sula's existence ironically inspires goodness in the neighbourhood and the women got conscious of their husband and children. They blamed her for all their weakness and fault, making her a pariah in the society. But Sula trying to be in possession of power and pleasure destroyed her best friend's married life. The separation from Sula after elopement of Jude left Nel in a dark atmosphere as both friends in all their good and bad completed each other. Despite the unusual outlook of Sula, Nel longed to speak to her as both in their teenage years were best in each other's company. The dejection of her husband because of her best friend still couldn't erase her memories about her, she suffered pain for both. She remembered Jude and felt his absence as her body carved for his love and touch. Like the nature she suppressed all her gloominess and moved ahead in her commitment as a mother. "Good taste was out of place in the company of death, death itself was the essence of bad taste." (*Sula* 107) Separation between friends led to agony, Nel kept herself busy with children and Sula in her loneliness. Sula died, but with her death goodness did not happen as expected by the people in Medallion instead there was unemployment, deforestation, late-harvesting and bad weather. The black people were facing trouble because of the conversion of the Bottomland to a golf course, cutting of trees and formation of the road to the suburbs. "The river had killed them all. No more silver-gray flashes, no more flat, wide, unhurried look. No more slowing down of gills." (*Sula* 174) Sula's death is linked to the destruction of nature in the

place she resided. With passing of time changes occurred in the town Medallion, the land which was once occupied by the blacks was taken by the whites for recreation and luxury purpose. "In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighborhood. It stood in the hills above the valley town of Medallion and spread all the way to the river. It is called the suburbs now, but when black people lived there it was called the Bottom. One road, shaded by beeches, oaks, maples and chestnuts, connected it to the valley. The beaches are gone now, and so are the pear trees where children sat and yelled down through the blossoms to passerby." (*Sula* 3) Twenty-five years after Jude's abandonment and Sula's death, Nel went to meet Sula's grandmother, Eva Peace in the Old age home. She was surprised and taken back when Eva alleges her of killing Chicken Little, the secret feeling which she has kept hidden from her own conscience was so easily caught by Eva Peace, so she hurriedly left the place. On her way back home, she went inside the graveyard where Sula was buried along with the other dead members of the family. She saw the names of all, the dead Peace family unit craved on separate slabs. After so many years, somewhere deep inside her heart she was still missing Sula, so looking at the trees she whispered her name and suddenly felt some sensation in the air as if the word Sula itself is creating the transformation in the surroundings. These changes evoked her deep-seated feeling of lonesomeness because of Sula's nonexistence, which she thought was for Jude. "Leaves stirred; mud shifted; there was the smell of overripe green things. A soft ball of fur broke and scattered like dandelion spores in the breeze." (*Sula* 174)

BELOVED: A STUDY OF ECOLOGY

In *Beloved* the black chattel slaves have no authority over their family and are sold as a piece of land and object. There were little restrictions for the Sweet Home slaves during the ownership of Mr. Garner, but his death changed the scenario. Everything went upside down with the arrival of the new master. The Garner's slaves Paul A Garner, Paul D Garner, Paul F Garner, Sixo, Halle and Sethe suffered equal exploitation and mutilation in the ownership of the Schoolteacher. Sethe, the black female slave is maltreatment the most after the death of the master Mr. Garner. "The black slave woman had no such untouchable sphere. She herself was the property of her white master. Not only did he control her labor, but in all too many instances he controlled her body as well." (Hanmer 30) The new slave master, the schoolteacher was a Puritan, who believed to be superior to Nature as he could overpower the slaves and the farm. Like the seventeenth centuries founding father of Virginia, William Byrd and John Winthrop who wrote non-fictional journal to pass it as record of history and sometimes as letters to their dear ones in the Old World, the schoolteacher had the habit of these early puritan narrators and wrote every day to day activity in his dairy. The schoolteacher's nephew carried out numerous experiments on Sethe to compare the similarities between her and animals. When any inhumane act was carried down the schoolteacher sits comfortably and notes down the happenings. The schoolteacher and his nephew turned the Kentucky plantation to be the most dreadful and frightening place for the slaves. "punched the glittering iron out of Sethe's eyes, leaving two open

wells that did not reflect firelight" (*Beloved* 11) The black men too looked degradingly at their black women, as she was a bed partner to the white master. She was humiliated both by white and black men. "Slaves not supposed to have pleasurable feelings on their own; their bodies not supposed to be like that, but they have to have as many children as they can to please whoever owned them. Still, they were not supposed to have pleasure deep down." (*Beloved* 247)

The continuous beating and whipping of the schoolteacher and his nephew, formed deep wound on Sethe's body and mind. She fled from the dreadful farm to join her children and mother-in-law in Ohio. On her way home she met Amy the white girl who helped her deliver the baby. While Amy was nursing Sethe, she was shocked to see her hurting back, which she sensitively describes as: "A chokecherry tree. See, here's the trunk-it's red and split wide open, full of sap, and this here's the parting for the branches. You got a mighty lot of branches. Leaves, too, look like, and dern if these ain't blossoms. Tiny little cherry blossoms, just as white." (*Beloved* 93) When Sethe and Paul D met after eighteen long years, he spends the night with her in her house 124, Ohio. When he was passionately making love to her, saw the scars on her back and was fascinated. Paul D like a besieged lover describes the deep scars on the back of Sethe as a piece of art: "decorative work of an ironsmith too passionate for display" (*Beloved* 21). The whipping on the back of Sethe is directly proportional to the annihilation of earth since the continuous exploitation of the earth has led to deformation of nature. Sethe silently endures all the beating and ugliness of the white master and tries to protect her Beloved by killing it and digging it deep inside the soil. Beloved, the dead child who was dug deep beneath earth has come in flesh to take her revenge. The different shades of gray at 124 are linked to Sethe's past deed. She and her children took shelter in her mother-in-law's place the 'Benevolent North' far from the dreadful place. Suddenly, on the twenty-ninth day the white master appears to claim his chattels. Sethe finding no place to hide her children tried to kill them and succeeded in killing her two years old daughter. The creator became the destroyer. After eighteen years, the murdered daughter Beloved comes back as a malevolent spirit to show its aggression towards Sethe. The unnatural changes in the mood of the house show its possession by a baby spirit, who has come to take revenge from her saviour. When Paul D enters the house "a wave of grief soaked him so thoroughly he wanted to cry" (*Beloved* 11). He was captivated listening to Sethe about her past, after she left Sweet Home eighteen years back. He noticed that with the sad news of her two year old daughter's death, the atmosphere of the house changed. "The red was gone but a kind of weeping clung to the air where it had been." (*Beloved* 11) The emotional change in the ambience of the house shows that the haunting spirit is reacting to each and every activities happening in the house. The story depicts the imbalance in the atmosphere because of the reluctant spirit's anger. The prevailing spirit Beloved is not allowing anybody to enter the small world which is restricted to the house of Sethe and her dead and alive daughters. The moment Stamp Paid tries to enter the house he feels a sort of aloofness in the atmosphere which stops him from further entering so he always turns back from the entrance. "Spirit willing; flesh weak." (*Beloved* 203) After the death of Baby Suggs, Denver was all alone in the house so when Beloved came back as a young woman in flesh, it fulfilled her emptiness. But the clinging of the spirit to her mother in

a dreadful way led Denver to look out for help from the society woman. The unity and prayer of the black women community stopped the poltergeist from creating further chaos in the world of Sethe. With the joint efforts of the black women, Denver succeeded in sending the spiteful ghost away. The cultural and spiritual roots of the black women made them strong enough to stand against the malicious spirit.

CONCLUSION:

Although there is a deep concern related to environmental racism towards the black women, there is still much to be done to improvise the situation. The environmental justice activist of colour ought to come out of the prejudice, affliction, discrimination, disguise in the predominantly white world. The environmental movement requires outstanding black women leadership position in all well-established sectors related to the environmental movement which can transform the approach towards environmental issues. There is an urgent need to understand and appreciate these black women and their rooted relationship with nature. The paper in a way sees women of colour who have been religiously ignored besides being a dominant part of the ecosystem. These are the people who really worshiped nature for a harmonious community living, who loved the nature, lived the nature, respected the nature and is a true by-product of nature and therefore nature and women are inseparable parts.

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