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## Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*: An Ecofeminist Discourse

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### **Abstract:**

Ecofeminism claims that the domination over women by men and the domination over nature by humans are intrinsically linked. This paper is a discourse on ecofeminism and a study of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* through the ecofeminist lens and aims to provide an insight into the interrelatedness between women and nature in their oppressed states which is a result of the domineering forces of men. Toni Morrison raises the issue of exploitation of nature by capitalistic men which causes ecological imbalance, thereby transforming nature into a vulnerable feminine space. In the wake of ecofeministic concerns, Morrison's literary preoccupation for the issue of survival envelops all subaltern including nature and encourages understanding and mutual respect between men and women and between human beings and nature respectively which will lead to meaningful survival of all life that exist on earth.

**Keywords:** ecofeminism, exploitation, domination, androcentric, anthropocentric.

Ecocriticism is a broad field of enquiry also known by names like green cultural studies, and environmental literary criticism. Of man's relationship with the environment, ecocritical scholar, William Rueckert (1978) states that the anthropocentric attitude of man encourages him to "conquer, humanize, domesticate, violate and exploit every natural thing"(110). The random exploitation and destruction of nature is the result of man's anthropocentric arrogance. Hence, the need to listen to the voices of nature is an important agenda in any ecocritical study. Ecocriticism is interdisciplinary in nature in the sense that it includes the sciences, social sciences and the humanities in its approach to the study of literature. In his book, *Practical Ecocriticism: Literature, Biology and the Environment* (2003), Glen Love insightfully states that, "Teaching and studying literature without reference to the natural conditions of the world and the basic ecological principles that underlie all life, seems increasingly shortsighted, incongruous." (15) Love asserts that literary scholars must respond to the environmental crisis by replacing 'anthropocentric' concerns with 'ecocentric' ones involving both human and non-human contexts and consideration. Besides its emphasis on the harmony between humanity and nature, ecocriticism also highlights the fact that man is directly responsible for the destruction caused to

nature in the modern world and gives a new meaning to place, setting and environment. Ecocriticism has been influenced by insights from philosophy, development studies in sociology, ecology, feminism, Marxism and other disciplines and approaches.

Ecofeminism, also called as 'Ecological Feminism', examines the connections between women and nature by addressing the exploitation of environment, women and marginalized people. By categorizing women and subjugated peoples with the environment, ecofeminism calls for recognition of social and environmental injustices from a unique and often ignored perspective, which in turn promotes solidarity and peace. The central tenet of ecofeminism is that social, cultural, racial and environmental issues are not separate, and that the causes of discriminating women, people of colour and nature stem from the same root and aims to address and eliminate all forms of domination while recognizing and embracing the interdependence and connection humans have with the earth.

The term 'ecofeminism' was coined by Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974 (*Earthcare* 5) and comments d'Eaubonne herself made like "urbanized, technological society, which is male-driven, has reduced the earth's fertility, while over-breeding, also male-driven, has increased the population" (qtd. in Gates 17), suggest that the origin of ecofeminism is quite close to cultural ecofeminism's idea. Ecofeminism in general can be quite simplistic: the common suggestion that a change in attitudes toward women will automatically change ways of behaving towards nature, or vice versa, neglects the complexities of both inter-human relationships and the relationships between humans and their environment. The term was popularized through its use in protest against environmental destruction. According to Charene 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 industrialist forms" (5).

In the introduction to *Reweaving the World: the Emergence of Ecofeminism*, Irene Diamond and Gloria Feman states that, "Ecofeminists began as feminists who sought to create a fundamental shift in consciousness with respect to the domination of women and nature, rather than simply accepting women's participation in the public sphere" (x).

In *The Death of Nature, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*, Carolyn Merchant states that "women and nature have an age-old association - an affiliation that have persisted throughout culture, language, and history. Their ancient interconnections have been dramatized by the simultaneity of two recent social movements - women's liberation and the ecology movement, which built up during the 1960s and finally captured national attention on Earth Day, 1970. Common to both is an egalitarian perspective. Women are struggling to free themselves from cultural and economic constraints that have kept them subordinate to men. Environmentalists, on the other hand, warning us of the irreversible consequences of continuing environmental exploitation are developing an ecological ethic emphasizing the interconnectedness between people and nature. Juxtaposing the goals of the two movements can

suggest new values and social structures, based not on the domination of women and nature as resources but on the full expression of both male and female talent and on the maintenance of environmental integrity” (xix). She is of the opinion that “today’s feminist and ecological consciousness can be used to examine the historical interconnections between women and nature that developed as the modern scientific and economic world took form in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – a transformation that shaped and pervades today’s mainstream values and perceptions” (xx).

Stacy Alaimo is of the opinion that “Feminism has long struggled with the historically tenacious entanglements of “woman” and “nature” - mother earth, earth mothers, natural women, wild women, fertile fields, barren grounds, virgin lands, raped earths portray nature as female and women as not exactly human...such cadaverous images have not only provoked the prodding and piercing of the natural world but have also embalmed “woman” as corporeal passive matter.” She states that “ in a dauntingly impermeable formulation, woman is not only constituted as nature, but nature is invoked to uphold the propriety of this very constitution, as when Rousseau baldly asserts that “the laws of nature” created woman “to please and be subjected to man” (2).

Simone de Beauvoir, for example suggests that one of the reasons women are “the second sex” is that they are nearly indistinguishable from the natural world: woman is related to nature; she incarnates it: vale of blood, open rose, siren, the curve of a hill, she represents to man a fertile soil, the sap, the natural beauty and soul of the world. Whereas, men mark their own transcendent subjectivity by separating themselves from the natural world; women then, seen as the embodiment of nature, are doomed to immanence and otherness” (3).

A review of the history of ecofeminism shows that there has been a general agreement among ecofeminists about the interrelatedness of the domination of women and nature. However, they have conflicting opinions when the discussion turns to the nature of the relationship, and whether or not it might be “potentially liberating or grounds for reinforcing harmful stereotypes about women” (Warren *Ecofeminist Philosophy* 21). Karen Warren notes that the differences of opinion among ecofeminist theorists, critics and writers reflect the “plurality of positions” one finds in various versions of feminism including Liberal, Marxist, Radical, Socialist and Cultural feminisms. The range of disciplinary approaches and philosophical orientations like symbolic and literary, spiritual and religious, epistemological, political, historical, conceptual, empirical, socio-economic, linguistic and ethical interconnections available to dissect or deconstruct the woman/nature analogy and culture/nature oppositions further complicates the debates within ecofeminism (Warren 21).

Some methods intersect in their approaches while others remain firmly within their own theoretical boundaries but, again, even individual disciplinary fields are not without their own

contentious issues. While trying to come to terms with these debates, questions and concerns pervading the ecofeminist agenda, Gates turned to Janis Birkeland who “gathered ideas” about what “ecofeminists have in common,” which include: “an appreciation of the intrinsic value of everything in nature – a biocentric rather than an anthropocentric viewpoint” and the desire to see “an end to dualisms like male/female, thought/action, and spiritual/natural; and a trust in process not just in product” (Gates 21). Thus, while perspectives and approaches may differ and create division, ecofeminists are united in their fundamental belief in the central role that dualism plays in the conceptual construction of the categories of ‘woman’ and ‘nature’; and they recognize the concomitant necessity of challenging androcentric and anthropocentric discourses that function to maintain opposition between various categories and uphold faulty conceptual frameworks that associate females with nature and nature with a debased femininity.

Born on February 18, 1931 in Lorain, Ohio, Toni Morrison is a Nobel Prize and Pulitzer Prize winning American novelist. Morrison, the first African-American to win the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993, uses her novels to express her concerns about the African-American experience. The themes of exploitation, race, displacement, deprivation, suffering, marginalization, resistance, survival and the urge to create and assert a sense of identity find expression in her fiction. Morrison’s novels also represent a distinctly African-American environmental ethic which pays close attention to the social forces that construct our relationship to the environment and insists upon the inextricability of the social from the natural (Encyclopedia of the Environment in American literature, 2013, 225). The impact of Toni Morrison on contemporary culture has been revolutionary and profound. In “Approaches to Morrison’s Work: Ecocritical” Tolman writes: “An ecocritical approach demands not just a scientific envisioning of the environment but also a psychological, sociological, religious, and historical analysis of nature and its manifestations in the work at hand. Morrison weaves all of these strands together to produce a narrative history of African Americans, a history largely ignored by white society”(7).

Toni Morrison, in her novels reflect the conflict between nature and civilization which affects all other human relationship and suggests a struggle for meaningful survival, which also means a continuous effort against forces that challenge peaceful existence and to achieve this, it is crucial to understand that every life is interconnected. Likewise, ecofeminists envision a society that complies with the agenda of ecofeminist peace politics which aims to break apart the dualisms and hierarchical structures in order to bring about a balance in men/women and human/nature relationships and as asserted by Mary Mellor “an ecofeminist society would be egalitarian and ecologically sustainable. There would be no sexual/gender division of labour, and any necessary work would be integrated with all aspects of communal life” (69).

*The Bluest Eye* tells the story of Pecola Breedlove, an eleven year old victim of popular white culture and its pervasive idea of beauty. She is made to believe that people would accept

her if she wasn't black, if she were white and had blue eyes and her desire to possess blue eyes becomes an intense obsession. She suffers the bewildering onset of puberty, bitter racial harassment and the tragedy of being raped by her own father, Cholly Breedlove. Black women and children are identified with nature succumbing to male power and dominance which "cripples nature and woman simultaneously" (Shiva, 41). This act of domination, exploitation and oppression has displaced the ecological world-views which Shiva interprets as an act of fragmentation which causes "a disruption of the ecological perceptions of nature" (41). It is also a study of the dichotomized relation between man/woman and man/nature and an ecofeminist reading of the novel suggests men's domination over women and human's domination over nature. Symbolising Pecola's rape by her own father, Cholly Breedlove as the destruction of nature by human beings, an ecofeminist reading of the novel suggests an impending danger. If women and nature are destroyed and willfully annihilated, it will lead to a total ecological breakdown as Vandana Shiva observes, "this ecological breakdown and social inequality are intrinsically related to the dominant development paradigm which puts man against and above nature and women" (48).

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. *The Bluest Eye* is a pathetic story of Black children in the American context where race, gender and class exploitation play a pivotal role in shaping their lived experiences within the white supremacist domain and patriarchy. In Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, black children, women and the nature are seen as victims, exploited by the domineering hands of men. Pecola Breedlove, the protagonist is a victim of the racially constructed idea of beauty. She yearns for blue eyes in the belief that she would be loved and accepted by her family as well as the society she lives in if only she possessed blue eyes. "A little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes" (138) is a desire much beyond her reality and she is driven to insanity as a result of this unrealistic desire and her father's rape. She becomes a helpless victim of severe racism and patriarchy and is equated with the destruction of the natural world. Being black becomes a curse for her as she is despised and unloved by everyone, she is even ignored and discriminated by her teachers and made "to sit alone at a double desk" (34).

*The Bluest Eye* has a number of flora images that lends to an interesting ecofeminist study. According to Mary Mellor in *Feminism and Ecology*, "ecofeminism is a movement that sees a connection between the exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women. Ecofeminism brings together elements of the feminist and green movements, while at the same time offering a challenge to both. It takes from the green movement a concern about the impact of human activities on the non-human world and from feminism the view of humanity as gendered in ways that subordinate and exploit, and oppress women" (1). The novel begins with the image of the marigold flower and reverts back to the failed marigolds in the end, the violation of women is the violation of nature and vice

versa which is of metaphoric significance in the unsprouting of the marigolds in the year 1941. "The flowers never grew because the damage done to Pecola was "total" since Pecola is nature destroyed and annihilated" (162).

The image of dandelions which Morrison uses in the novel is a part of nature and is analogous to Pecola. To Pecola, the dandelions look beautiful and she cannot understand "why people call them weeds? She wonders and listens to the grown-ups talk: Miss Dunion keeps her yard so nice. Not a dandelion anywhere. Hunkie women in black babushka go into the fields with baskets to pull them up. But they do not want the yellow heads – only the jagged leaves" (35). Pecola later understands why people uproot them: "they are ugly. They are weeds" (37). In the tamed garden of Miss Dunion, all natural wild plants are destroyed which represent a conflict between wilderness and civilization where the latter is given more importance, ignoring the fact that when the fields with dandelion are totally cleared, the biotic community is disturbed which causes imbalance in the ecological system. Pecola aligns herself with the dandelions, they are both unwanted and therefore, destroyed. She is ignored by the white people and by her own community as well and like the leaves of the dandelions used to make soup and wine, she and other black women are utilized as domestic servants. Women and nature are the unprivileged section of the social and cultural systems of society and seen as less intellect and this can be compared with the heads of dandelions being thrown away after extracting soup and wine.

Pecola belongs to the wilderness, to the natural world, to the endless natural landscape that is tamed and finally raped of its innocence. Pecola's rape by her drunken father is similar to the destruction of the natural world by the drunken world of civilization. The natural world is intruded by human beings and the destruction of earth becomes a metaphor of rape which brings the oppressed state of women and nature under the same banner of domination and subordination. Pecola's innocence is nature's innocence and Pecola's body is the natural landscape which is trampled by man's conquest. The purity and serenity of the natural world which revolves around the beauty of the four seasons is marred, so is Pecola and the earth and the seasons do not function in their natural way.

The spring season which is a season of hope and growth, ironically suggests the depression of winter and this unnatural phenomenon in the cycle of seasons suggests an apocalypse, both for nature and the life of Pecola, and spring brings neither joy nor hope: "even now spring for me is shot through with the remembered ache of switchings, and forsythia holds no cheer" (75). The predicted risk in the biotic community and the expected apocalypse is fulfilled in the last part of the novel titled "Summer", where "the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year" (164) and through this Morrison strongly predicts the total destruction of the environment and drives home the point that the rape of Pecola is the rape of the earth. Besides various intersecting oppressions of race, class and gender, ecocritics have begun to find a connection between these issues which affects women as well as nature. The patriarchal

oppression of women is seen in relation to the human domination of the non-human nature by ecofeminists because women and nature are intrinsically connected, holding a marginalized position. The twin domination of patriarchal oppression of women and human domination of nature is perceived as a form of violence and the immoral sexual behavior on women is viewed as ‘bestial’ or ‘animal’ (Garrard, 141).

Ecofeminists protest and resist such victimisation of the “other” and questions the binary of domination and subordination, violence and silence, oppressor and oppressed. Ecofeminist 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 women, children and nature. Ecofeminist theory is grounded on people’s different experiences and observations and the voices of ecofeminism are diverse, however their common thread is the recognition of the relationship between the domination of nature and the domination of women. The realization for an urgent need to create equal rights which can save the earth urges many environmental activist to embrace ecofeminism. Judith Plant opines that, “our origins are in the earth beneath our feet, in the living and dying that is our organic reality. This arrogant smokescreen of patriarchy – where some are deemed better than, or more deserving than others – allow us to deny this most basic fact of life” (131). It is this ‘separating’ attitude of patriarchy that promotes rape, violence and exploitation of women and nature which ecofeminism rejects along with the uncontrolled technological advancements, mass consumerism, and unrestrained economic growth at the cost of democracy and human values. The novels of Morrison gives a full and profound expression of her ecofeminist thoughts and shows her ecofeminist desire for equal and harmonious human-nature, men-women, black-white and individual-community relationships because she is fully aware of the deteriorated condition of the suppressed.

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