
Revisoning the American Landscape Using Toni Morrison's African-American Characters

19

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Abstract

This paper aims at bringing out the interconnected themes of landscape and mindscape of Toni Morrison's characters. It further examines the character's depth and their relation with the natural world. The present study focuses on the inner sensibilities of African-American women in relation to nature. Moreover, it attempts to study how nature has served as a cultural legacy to reveal the inner struggles and bring their true selves to light. It extends an arm to define the psyche of each character about their reflection on nature and also explores the infused imageries and the metaphorical representation of the characters with nature and their psyche.

Keywords

Mindscape, landscape, inner sensibility, nature, spirituality, imagery.

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Toni Morrison is an unflinching champion of the African Americans and their struggle for existence in the vast American landscape. She lays emphasis on rape, madness, alienation, women empowerment through women characters. Her novels are mostly characterized by dramatic and poetic import, as she uses metaphors and imageries exceedingly to make it culturally rich. She mostly represents the past through memory of the characters in narrowing the present sometimes in relation with nature. She strongly bounds with the characters both with family and the society, as she represents culture, identity and a sense of belonging through their reflection on their family and society. She connects herself with nature and advocate that in her novels through the characters. Her reflection on the landscape and mindscape of the characters are the main focus of this study. She as a Nobel laureate has written with an adorable literary imagination.

Ecology is a study of the relation between any organisms and their connection with the environment they live in. As, George Perkins Marsh states that “All nature is linked together by invisible bonds and every organic creature, however low, however feeble, however dependent is necessary to the wellbeing of some other myriad forms of life”. Thus, nature and human are interrelated as one reflects the other. Ecocentrism is a concept that considers the action of the environment irrespective of its goodness or harmfulness. They just portray the relation with nature to man where, anthropocentrism is “human centred” and humans relation to nature with its ethics. Eco-feminism is a movement that connects women with nature, as concerned with the universal idea of women with nature and men with culture. It actually reflects the sexual, racial, cultural exploitation of women with nature and its exploitation. This study reflects the female gender and their relation with nature. So, this study narrows its path to women and nature in their relation with the culture and race.

Ecofeminism was coined by the French feminist Francoise d' Eaubonne, which focuses on correlating nature with women in terms of culture, politics, economy, religion etc. Ecofeminism has advocated principles of bringing out the oppression of the marginalized groups

and the nature connected by a cause namely patriarchy limitations of marginalized people and people of color by subjugation. It also proposes on replacing our culture of dominance with care for nature and humans. Arolyn merchant says, "ecofeminism is calling for an ethic of care and an ethic where decisions are made equitably". So, if care propounds in human and nature will be preserved. Eco feminist calls for an "ethics of care" grounded in nature and human. They also talk on a change to be undergone to bring about equality in the society. As, discrimination and oppression results in many unfeasible circumstances where destruction of nature results in partiality one being happy and the other poor out of all the other oppositions. Sarah Regan, rightly advocates on the shortcomings and criticism of the ecofeminist. She even talks about the idea of essentialism or "belief that brings the that set characteristics". The present paper focuses on the study between nature and women characters.

Toni Morrison is among many writers who inextricably relates environment with her characters as the characters are grounded Afro Americans but the land they live in is America, they relatively found lot of cultural relations with the characters. "Annis Janine Wardi" in her work "Toni Morrison and the natural world: An ecology of color" tells that "In fusion of history onto the natural world is the very bedrock of African American ecocritical thought" (Wardi,5). Thus, Morrison asserts ecological consciousness in her works in relation with nature and the characters. She has written many novels among which this study limits with '*The Bluest Eye*' and '*Beloved*'.

Eco-feminism has actually shifted its way more from what is before as initial ecofeminist thinker, Rosemary Radford Ruther, author of *New woman/ New Earth* says, women must see what there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society those fundamental modes of relationship continues to be one of domination. They must unite the demands of the women's movement with those of the ecological movement to envision a radical reshaping of the basic socio-economic relations and underlying values of the society" (204)

Initially it was theory oriented and philosophical as it reconceptualises the self with the natural world. Freya Mathews, an ecofeminist who wants to advance this use of strategica, as she says theoretical attempts convey, “ethical relationship between self and the world”. (61) so, she cautiously advances this term by strategica which gives new dimension in the normative practices. Then these practices are advanced by Gretchen T Legler who calls them as “emancipatory strategies” to reimagine nature and human relationship.

1. Re-mything nature as a speaking “bodied” object
2. Erasing or blurring of boundaries between inner (emotional, psychological, personal) and outer geographic landscapes or the erasing or blurring of self-other (human/non-human) distinctions.
3. Re-eroticizing human relationship with a bodied landscape or the introduction in Euro-American text and the reconfiguration in some native American text of ritual sexual intercourse as a means of speaking with land.
4. Historicizing and politicizing nature and the author as a participant in nature
5. Expressing an ethics of caring friendship or a loving eye as a principle for relationship with nature
6. Attempting to unseat vision or mind knowledge, from a privileged position as a way of knowing or positing the notion that bodies know
7. Affirming the value of partial views and perspectives, the importance of “bioregions” and the locatedness of human subjects (Eco-feminist Literary criticism,230-31)

With these emancipatory strategies the novels are further analysed. In the very beginning of the novel *The Bluest Eye* there is a symbolic representation of nature and female body. As the death of Pecola’s child represents the unyielding marigolds that year.

“Quiet as its kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at that time, that it was because Pecola was having her father’s baby and the marigolds did not grow” (*The Bluest Eye* 3)

So, here nature is embodied as a speaking bodied object as it reflects and reacts human suffering. When Pecola was raped by her father the earth reacted this way without flowers. Hence there is a comparison between the unyielding earth and the condition of Pecola. Overall, *The Bluest Eye* sets up white standards of beauty and Pecola's desire for blue eye which defines so. In this study nature is specified as a speaking picture as it depicts Pecola's life with the unyielding earth of that year. Her, Pecola's baby dies just like the Marigolds that do not bloom. These elements of nature are significant, as the text foregrounds its attribute towards the characteristics of nature, "We have 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 are no more productive than his lust or despair. What is clean now is that of all that hope, fear, lust, love and grief, nothing remains but Pecola and the unyielding earth. Cholly Breedlove is dead: our innocence too. The seeds shrivelled and died; her baby too" (*The Bluest Eye* 4)

Secondly, there is an ethics of caring and a loving eye for the relationship with nature. This is evident with her love for even the weeds" dandelions" and her eyes on looking at things in a better way. She says, "The dandelions at the base of the telephone pole. Why, she wonders, do people call them weeds? She thought they were pretty" (*The Bluest Eye* 45). Pecola, thus has a loving eye on the dandelions and she loved nature even if people call it ugly or a weed. This evidentially reflects her love for nature. Pecola considers herself in relation with nature and that is why she started loving even small things in nature.

Pauline shifts to Ohio and she is affected by many factors including the landscape and its weather, "changes in weather began to affect her, as did certain sights and sounds" (*The Bluest Eye* 111). Thus, nature affects humans like a man affecting a man. Here, nature can be personified as a living being as it blurs the distinctions between reality and the inner self. Thus, the environment affects her inner self and she tends to remain alone for few days and thus nature reflects the inner mind through the landscapes.

In *Beloved*, beyond talking about slavery and Sethe's trauma there is an underlying description of nature which confronts lots of meaning to the setting of the novel in Ohio. Ohio River seems to be the place for a search for freedom for the slaves. As nature liberates oneself spiritually this river liberates the slaves. Sethe crosses this river to acquire freedom from her slavery this is evident through the narration of the Denver's birth tale by Sethe, "Sethe thinks that the baby She is pregnant with (Denver) must be dead. She limps into the river with Amy. Ahere Sethe suddenly goes in to labour" This represents Sethe's escape from the slave house to her freedom. Thus, river here represents a free space for Sethe and Denver is born out of it. On the other hand," *Beloved* is also coming out of the river as a new woman, the lines," Near 124, an unidentified young woman in a nice-looking dress climbs out of the river. She is described as having new skin." So, river represents freedom and life and it is described as a speaking bodied object.

Just as Pauline is affected after her shift to Ohio in "The Bluest Eye", Sethe in *Beloved* is described with an unpleasant environment with the winter season, as winter symbolically represents death in European languages, here the climate is harsh which also refers to the inner self of Sethe and her present condition.

"Winter in Ohio was especially rough, if you had an appetite for color, sky provided the only drama and counting on a Cincinnati horizon for life's principal joy was reckless indeed. So, Sethe and the girl did what they could and what the house permitted for her. Together they waged a perfunctory battle against the outrageous behaviour of that place against turned over slop jars, smacks on the behind and gusts of sour air. For they understood the source of the outrage as well as they knew source of light" (*Beloved* 4)

Thus, Sethe's innerself is described with the harsh climatic condition of winter. This blurs the reality with one's psyche.

Ultimately, the novels, *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye* represents the three emancipatory strategies in this study. Nature as a bodied object is studied through the unyielding earth and Pecola's condition after

being raped by her father. Secondly it blurs the boundaries between the inner and outer geographical landscapes and it is analysed through the character of Pauline who shifts to Ohio and Sethe's condition is foretold with its connection n with the harshness of the winter season. As, nature aids there physical and mental sufferings. Finally, this study concludes with another strategy of having an ethics of caring or a loving eye for nature and it best describes Pecola's character as she even loved the dandelions that no one liked. This study analysed three strategies through the lens of eco-feminism with Toni's Morrison's debut *The Bluest Eye* and her masterpiece "Beloved".

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