Eco-Feminism in Toni Morrison’s *Bluest Eye*

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Abstract

The present paper endeavours to examine of Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* with an Ecofeministic approach. It reveals how nature and women are interrelated to each other and how both are repressed by the patriarchal social setup in the same manner and how women and nature both are resisting this dominance in their own styles. Ecofeminism works as a symbol in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*. Women suffer unfairly and are possibly to sustain more tribulations and hazards than men. Most of feminists accept that ecology is a concern of feminism, however they think variedly over the nature and power of ecofeminism. Ecofeminism ingrains its basic hold on certain beliefs that point to the survival of significant networks between the suppression of women and that of nature. All the female characters in *The Bluest Eye* are interrelated and affected by nature in one or other ways. This suppression is still there in the present-day.

**Keywords:** Ecofeminism, Oppression, Women, Nature, Gender, Patriarchal
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Toni Morrison is a uniquely distinguished contemporary novelist in the history of American literature of the twentieth century. All her novels do with African American characters and communities. In woman novelists of twentieth century America, she is the rare one who thinks deeply of nature in her novels. As the evolution of eco-feminism, some studies begin to explore the novels in terms of eco-feminist perspective. Eco-criticism has become one of the fast-growing and promising fields in literary study and a “self-conscious enterprise,” after a gradual start in the early 1990s. Eco-feminism defines philosophies and movements that interlink feminism with ecology. As the environmental movement along with environmental disaster raise the sensibility of women to the destruction of the earth, they start to view a resemblance between the devaluation of the women and the devaluation of the earth. Women begin to perceive the interlink as not an unreal construction of weakness, but as a stable unifying force that resolved the infringement of women and the earth as part of the same drama of male control. Gaard and Murphy defines ecofeminism as:

Ecofeminism is a practical movement for social change arising out of the struggle of women to sustain themselves, their families, and their communities. These struggles are waged against the “maldevelopment” and environmental degradation caused by patriarchal societies, multinational corporations and global capitalism. (p. 3)

The idea of eco-feminism adopts the age-old interconnection between nature and women as a bridge to reinforce both the feminism and the ecological movements which try to stop the suppression of nature and women. Eco-feminism calls for a stoppage to all repressions. Eco-feminism interconnects the domination and exploitation of women with that of the environment, and contends that there is an interconnection between nature and women that comes from their mutual history of repression by a patriarchal society. Eco-feminism
should re-conceptualize the interrelationship of nature and women as “sisters” based on mutual repression of the woman and the non-human world. Both women and nature are predominant themes in Toni Morrison’s novels which extend the usefulness of implementing this idea to her novels.

*The Bluest Eye* is Toni Morrison’s debut novel and normally examined in terms of postcolonial critics, psychoanalytic critics, and feminist critics. This novel could chiefly represent theories of eco-feminism and the early thoughts of Toni Morrison. Cultural eco-feminism has been probed through the description of rape, menstruation, and natural images in the novel. These descriptions accentuate women’s femininity and the interconnections with nature. Through the kitchen in which the story takes place and the portrayal of housework, the idea of social eco-feminism can be perceived.

The novel, *The Bluest Eye*, is a work of complex symbolism right from the very first page of the text. The novel begins with a replica of content from a primer prevalently read at elementary level in American schools. This rhyme-like text is highly symbolic and paves way for the reader to silt in his/her mind that despite this novel being a story of a Black American family, there is no mention of the blacks in the given rhyme. This is symbolic of how blacks are negligible, avoidable, and disposable in the mainstream American society constituting white families which further comprise of a white father, a white mother and their white son and daughter - with white names - Dick and Jane. At first reading, one would not find an easy relation between this text and the novel. The initial text actually has everything that the novel has not. The fact that this text has been given thrice on the page – one using proper grammar and punctuation, second time, without punctuation and yet another time with blank spaces removed – which implies that there are certain characters in the novel who psychologically fight with the demons of their identity that fear them. One would find the family name of Pecola’s father ‘Breedlove’ highly symbolic. Cholly, who is unable to ‘love’ and is only
capable of breeding, breeds with his own daughter doing the most heinous of the things in the blurry thoughts of love and lust. While it is easy to find many other symbols in the novel - some on the surface, others concealed a bit deeper - it is still interesting to find how symbols of ecofeminism endeavour to convey new insights of feminism in relation to those of ecological concern.

_The Bluest Eye_ mainly focuses on the background of revolution and sprouting black consciousness of the sixties in America. Also, the period suggests the religious struggle for personal and racial identity. Toni Morrison chooses the oppression of black women as the basic theme of her works. Her works deploys the American standard of beauty that seems both inevitable and critical condition of black community. The novel highlights the tragic story about young girl named as a Pecola Breedlove, who desires for the blue eyes, which means for her it is too beautiful and she feels more noted worthiness in the society. The fundamental idea of the novel is the domination of white people by presenting the American standards of beauty, blue eyes, blond hair, and white skin. It deals honestly and sympathetically on damaging how the principles enabled by the institutionalised slavery controlled by white dominant society. _The Bluest Eye_ centres on the contradictions promoted on racism, sexism, and class distinction which is affecting black women in the white dominant society of America. Toni Morrison deploys the racism as a primary obstacle in her literary career.

_The Bluest Eye_ exposes not only the tale of the critical effects of intra racial conflicts of injustice upon the black girls in Midwest of America, and also it produces a brief account of African – American folk culture in process. The black’s belief that their race and colour was not valuable and they face the cultural hindrances throughout their history in America. This belief forefronts the protagonist Pecola Breedlove in a tragic life and she basically comes from a poor family and breaks from the normal life of a black community. Pecola hate
herself on her ugliness and unworthiness of her own skin colour. Her mother Pauline, who labours as a housemaid servant in a white people’s beautiful house, thus the situation makes her to admire the place of work, class, and white gender. She became despise of her own community, ugliness of her colour, children and family.

Due to race Pecola faces many incidents of isolation and pain in the American society. Furthermore, she was abused and ignored by her society for her colour. Geraldine is one of Toni Morrison’s sugar brown southern women, who is married to a white man because she wanted to merge herself with the dominant white society through which she aspired to de – emphasize her African roots one must be horrified to hear her scowling at the frightened and innocent Pecola as “nasty little black bitch”(TBE,P.90) Louis junior the son of Geraldine deprived himself became isolated in the home and fearful while Pecola is crossing his home he calls him for playing with his cat. While playing junior threatens Pecola with the cat on her face. Suddenly she tries to protect her and so she tightly catches the cat and it becomes drowsy, without knowing the fact Geraldine enters and scold Pecola in a vulgar language for making her cat to die. Geraldine attitude reveals that how racism was brutally practised in America. Regarding Yacobowski, he was a member of the immigrant working class. As a white male, he was allowed superior before the little black girl Pecola. He uses to marginalise Pecola in his candy stores.” She holds the money - three pennies - towards him. He hesitates not wanting to touch her hand.”(TBE, P.47)Lastly, he scraped her “damppalm.”(TBE, P.48) From this ill-treatment of Yacobowski, it is noticeable how racism was cruelly practised against the black women’s in America.

The Claudia and Frieda Macteers girls who acted as instruments in liberating the blacks, this is evident in the following incidents: Claudia and Frieda were the little girls who showed much love and affection towards the young girl -Pecola Breedlove. Throughout the novel, they were the only humans who were the instruments of emancipating Pecola from
the fetters of the white American society as well as from her own family members whether they could emancipate her or not, they have voiced for this marginalised, little poor girl as far as they could. Their mother scolded Pecola for drinking milk: “Three quarts of milk. That’s what was in that icebox yesterday, Three whole quarts. Now they ain’t none. Not a drop. I don’t mind folks coming in and getting what they want, but three quarts of milk! what the devil does anybody need with three quarts of milk?” (TBE, P.23)

Claudia and Frieda expressed their protest feeling of sorry for their mothers scolding on Pecola’s drinking milk. Claudia explicit that Pecola drank milk not because of fond of drinking milk but because she loved Shirley Temple’s face which was painted in the cup. “Some milk in a blue and white Shirley Temple cup.” (TBE, P.19) Pecola loved Shirley Temple for her white beauty and for her blue eyes and degraded herself as ugly creature. In other words, she fortunately believes that if she had blue eyes, she would become beautiful and everyone would love her. Thus, as a black girl, Pecola undergoes all the traumatic experiences of race in the white dominant society. As Suranyi notes,

In *The Bluest Eye*, the black mother hates her own child as a reminder of her hopeless situation and adores the young child of the family she works for. Morrison clearly condemns a racist culture for its worship of white standards of beauty... (P.13)

Pauline adores the white little girl in this family, and gives her the love and affection she denies her own children. The white family is happily with her too. Not having had a nickname as a child, she finally gets one as the family calls her Polly, which adds to her in the sense of belonging her to the white family. To them she is the ideal servant, Keeping everything in its place, caring about the little girl who lives there, where as she ignores her own: “Into her son she beat a loud desire to run away, and into her daughter she beat fear of
growing up, fear of other people, fear of life” (TBE,P.128). The discontent and anger which Pecola’s parents feel about their lives, clearly ruins Pecola’s childhood.

Pauline and Cholly neglected Pecola in her every endeavour and they had fails to shower love on her. This which shows their rejection of their own daughter for her colour, race, gender, and unworthiness of ugliness. “The Breedloves despise themselves because they believe in their own unworthiness which is translated into ugliness for the women of that family” (ASRGC, P. 51). This is also shown in Pecola’s thought about how things would be different if she only had blue eyes. The distorted perception of love and care that Cholly displays when he rapes Pecola, and which stems from his own childhood experiences of unworthiness, illustrates how her parent’s attitudes to love and sexuality have become perverted into abuse:

She was washing dishes. Her small back hunched over the sink. Cholly saw her dimly and could not tell what he saw or what he felt. Then he became aware that he was uncomfortable; next he felt the discomfort dissolve into pleasure. The sequence of his emotions was revulsion, guilt, pity, and then love. (TBE,P.161)

Cholly senses that his daughter is in unhappy mood and he becomes angry at her for not being happy, reading her “helpless” and “whipped” posture as an accusation against himself. when he sees his daughter’s haunted and loving eyes he becomes furious, but when she scratches the back of her calf with a toe he is reminded of Pauline’s gesture when he first saw her, and he is filled with a softness that turns into a sexual arouse and it makes him to be with lustful mood. Cholly brutally rapes Pecola. When Pauline enters the house and she intimated passively did by her father, without asking her she beats her violently. Even this situation becomes worse and the black women in America were not having rights voice their oppression in their community itself. This highlights the interracial conflicts and
marginalised life of the black women in the white dominant society. The news has been
scandalling throughout America and it becomes the dehumanising victimisation done by
father to his own child so far in them American history. Usually before civil war in America
the black women were molested by the white people. But this is the first time that black
father who raped his own daughter mercilessly. In the human cycle naturally the parent’s
primary duty is to fulfil the desires of their children and shower their predominant love. But
Cholly become diverted from her moral principles and acted like the five-sense animal.

During the summer season ClaudiaMacteer and Frieda Macteer went to the
Midwest town to sell the Marigold seed and while they are selling some of them called them
in and they are hosted by ice chill water and they heard some of them are discussing about
that the black Pecola was impregnate by her own father. “Did you hear about the
girl?’”‘whatpregnant?’“Who? I don’t know all these little old boys.” That just it. Ain’t No
Little Old Boy. They say itsCholly.“Cholly? Her Daddy?’”“uh- huh” (TBE,P.186-87).

The Macteer girls could not bear the oppression of Pecola. So, they have earned
savings by selling the marigold seeds, to buy the bicycle , and they think to leave idea of
buying and instead of that they bought marigold seeds and planted in their backside of home
and they superstitiously believe that the seeds erupt as a plant Pecola’s baby will be safe and
if not sprouted well the baby will dies . At last their belief becomes false and Pecola’s baby
dies. Eventhough the Macteer girls are prevails from the white dominant society they could
not allow the oppression done to her friend Pecola.

Different themes have been analysed by Toni Morrison as, racial discrimination,
women friendship, self -development, evil and goodness,marriage and sex, etc. Her eco-
feminist responsibility for nature has rarely been explored. The novel, Bluest Eye,deployts that
Pecola Breedlove is oppressed by racially and sexually on the basis of class distinction, race,
and gender. Her condition is funk, violence, ugliness and poorness symbolise by her family
situation of storefront house. She mainly focuses on racism which prevails in American society as a primary obstacle of the Africans in the American society. The close study of the novel *The Bluest Eye* forefronts the view point of women’s oppression takes place through race, gender, class consciousness. Initially she thinks that racism is the only form of oppression of Africans in the white dominant society. Through this novel she authentically indicates that sexism is the other primary cause of women’s oppression. The fate of Black Women in *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison, being a black woman writer, in her novels, shows her concern for and reflection about the destiny of the black women, the African-American culture and their communities. Eco-feminists talk about the relation of women and nature. Environment of the nature is being degraded in the novels. A tentative reading of *The Bluest Eye* from the eco-feminist perspective show Toni Morrison’s eco-feminist consciousness and explore the deep literary value of the novel.

**References**


