



Death of Woman and Nature in *The Bluest Eye*: An Eco-Feministic Study

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Abstract

*Eco-feminism constitutes a significant dimension of eco-criticism and ecological studies within the framework of postcolonial discourse. Its central aim is to investigate the complex interrelations between women and the natural world, emphasizing their fundamental connection to the environment. From a postcolonial lens, eco-feminism endeavors to address the oppression faced by women, nature, and the environment, particularly in the context of environmental injustices, rather than merely advocating for the preservation of environmental ethics. The environmental ethics articulated by Rousseau can be linked to the concept of environmental justice, which is intricately associated with racial politics. Theme of racism and environmental degradation in the era of colonizers can be frequently traced by scholars in African-American literature, especially in the writings of Toni Morrison. Eco-feminism is predicated on the understanding that the ideologies that facilitate the oppression of women based on race, class, gender, and sexuality are the same ideologies that rationalize the subjugation of nature. Thus, women, the environment, and nature emerge as three essential elements of eco-feminism. In this regard, the present paper intends to examine Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye* through an eco-feminist lens, concentrating on the core tenets of eco-feminism. This paper will also explore how women and nature established a deep connection to each other where both share their long-suppressed history in male-dominated society.*

Keywords: *Eco-Feminism, Exploitation, Racism, Male-Centric, Ecology, Woman, Nature, Interconnectedness*

Introduction

Eco-feminism is a vital component of eco-criticism, a movement founded by the French feminist Francoise d'Eaubonne. Eaubonne highlights the intrinsic links between women and nature, which, when viewed in a broader context, underscores the connection between humanity and the environment. This perspective advocates for social and environmental justice, particularly emphasizing the roles of women and nature. Eco-feminists seek as Marry Mellor pens down the "connection between the exploitation and the degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women" (*Feminism and Ecology*, p. 1) in male-dominated society. In 1974, Eaubonne coined the term "ecofeminism" to draw attention to the

critical reality that the urbanized, industrialized, and male-dominated realms of science and technology have adversely affected the 'fertility of the earth,' a notion that is revered in both Greek and Indian mythologies. This comparison suggests that the fertility of the earth is closely related to the fertility of women, embodying themes of beauty, love, marriage, and procreation. As a result, eco-feminism calls for the reverence and protection of nature and women, standing against their exploitation, suffering, and subjugation by patriarchal systems, male dominance, and power imbalances. As Karen J. Warren mentions in her book that, "according to ecological feminists ("ecofeminists"), important connection exists between the treatment of women, people of color, and the underclass on one hand and the treatment of nonhuman nature on the other" (*Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature*, p.3).

Discussion

In Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), readers are prompted to consider the harmful effects and obsessions tied to 'white standards of beauty' in 1940s America, particularly in relation to Pecola Breedlove, an African-American girl who faces derision from her parents due to their perception of her lack of beauty. From an eco-feminist perspective, Pecola's rape by her father, Cholly Breedlove, serves as a metaphor for the broader devastation of nature by humanity, exemplified by the failure of marigold flowers to thrive. This failure directly results from the abuse of Pecola and endures under patriarchal authority and racial subjugation, leading to a condition where woman and nature were raped. Pecola laments the unjust uprooting of the beautiful 'dandelions,' because people consider them as "they *are* ugly. They *are* weeds"(48). Her affinity for these wild plants, identified as 'dandelions,' highlights Morrison's dedication to environmental restoration and the ideals of wilderness ethics. To Pecola, the dandelions embody beauty but she was unable to find out why "do people call them weeds?"(45). It is essential to recognize Morrison's profound awareness of the various forms of oppression that affect both women and the natural world. Pecola, as an African-American girl, is marginalized by both her family and society, reflecting her lack of 'free space' in a home dominated by her own race and in a society governed by white Americans. The challenges faced by Pecola can be compared to the exploitation and degradation of the natural environment, symbolically represented in *The Bluest Eye* through the vivid imagery of flowers.

In Toni Morrison's poignant novel *The Bluest Eye*, the portrayal of Black children within the American landscape reveals their profound subjugation to white supremacist ideologies, shaped by the intersections of gender, race, and class exploitation. While the narrative illustrates a complex web of overlapping oppressions stemming from various social issues, ecocritics have started to acknowledge the significance of race, class, and gender in addressing the challenges faced by women and children, all of which are further impacted by the natural environment.

The Bluest Eye stands as a significant reflection on the devastation of the natural world, which embodies sanity, peace, and ethical integrity, in contrast to the chaotic insanity and intoxication associated with what is considered civilized society. Nature and women both are failed to get a respectable place in the so-called civilized society. P. K. Nair mentions that "During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this 'civilization' was tied up with two other 'movements,' colonialism and capitalism. Both regarded nature as something to be exploited by humans" (*Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*, p.244) and this notion is still not stopped today. Morrison's narrative clearly illustrates how the natural environment is threatened by the anthropocentric views held by contemporary and postmodern individuals. Following the two devastating World Wars, the destruction of the earth serves as a poignant symbol for both the exploitation of the planet and the anguish experienced by Pecola. Both the earth and Pecola suffer from suppression and oppression under the weight of patriarchy and gender dominance. When examined from a broader lens, Pecola's innocence, despite her perceived

unattractiveness and fragility, mirrors the inherent innocence of nature, characterized by its original beauty and unblemished purity. At the same time, Pecola's physical appearance can be compared to the natural landscape, which is ravaged by the unyielding progress of civilization and modern humanity.

In addition to mentioning 'dandelions,' Morrison emphasizes 'marigold,' 'grass,' and 'rivers,' which represent the endangered natural environment. The author's concern for environmental issues is vividly illustrated in the opening section of the novel, where Claudia, the young narrator, recounts the transformation of a once picturesque ravine now tainted by pollution and refuse from the Zick's Coal Company in the industrial town of Ohio. As she and her sister make their way home from school, they witness "the great carloads of slag being dumped, red hot and smoking, into the ravine that skirts the steel mill. The dying fire lights the sky with a dull orange glow"(8). A keen observer would feel "a shiver when his feet leave the gravel path and sink into the dead grass in the field" (8). It becomes evident that the lifeless marigolds, along with the dead grass and the river polluted with waste, symbolize humanity's invasion of the natural ecosystem. The deterioration of the natural world also serves as a metaphor for the degradation and marginalization of women. For instance, Pauline finds comfort and hope in the genuine town of Kentucky, whereas in the industrial city of Ohio, she is engulfed by regret and isolation, laboring relentlessly to provide for her family. After coming to Ohio from her village she describes her condition, "That was the lonest time of my life. I 'member looking out them front windows just waiting for Cholly to come home at three o'clock. I didn't even have a cat to talk to"(115).

Eco-feminism asserts that the subjugation of women and the exploitation of the natural world are intrinsically linked, with capitalism and American societal structures recognized as the primary sources of this oppression. The mechanisms of appropriation and domination are identified as key drivers of the oppression faced by both women and the environment, perpetuating violence and intersecting with systemic inequalities related to race, class, and gender. Women and mules are depicted as victims, both reduced to a state of dehumanization. The treatment of mules, who endure severe conditions and bear heavy loads, parallels the experiences of Black women, who are similarly likened to mules, carrying the burdens of labor both within their homes and in broader society. As articulated by Collins in her seminal work, *The Black Feminist Thought*, that "Making black women work as if they were animals or 'mules of the world', represents one form of objectification" (Collins, p. 78), emphasizing the significance of objectification within the framework of oppositional difference. This notion of oppositional difference highlights the binary classifications that categorize individuals, concepts, and entities based on their differences. As a result, we encounter dichotomies such as man/ woman, white/ black, culture/nature, adult/ child, human/ non-human, and civilization/wilderness, with this dualistic thinking interpreted through the dynamics of their interrelations. Such binary reasoning shapes our perceptions and understandings of these distinctions, favoring the first term in each pair over the second.

The mule serves as a domesticated creature trained to follow human commands, paralleling the experiences of Black women who fulfill their designated responsibilities both within their own households and in the residences of white families as 'mammies' or domestic workers. This theme of African American women facing similar adversities is illustrated in the following excerpt, where Pecola's mother implores her father to fetch coal for heating during the severe winter, yet he hesitates to meet this crucial responsibility for his family:

*"I said I need some coal. It's as cold as a witch's tit in this house.
Your whiskey ass wouldn't feel hellfire, but I'm cold. I got to do
lot of things, but I ain't got to freeze."
"Leave me 'lone."*

"Not until you get me some coal. If working like a mule don't give me the right to be warm, what am I doing it for?" (38)

In Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, the character Pecola, an eleven-year-old Black girl, harbors a deep longing for blue eyes, which symbolizes her desire to transcend the limitations imposed by her identity. She is depicted as "a little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes" (172), a yearning that remains forever out of reach. This fixation ultimately drives her into madness. Pecola is subjected to severe racial discrimination and the oppressive dynamics of patriarchy. She is often compared to elements of the natural world, characterized as vulnerable and in search of safety and independence. The narrative serves as a critique of the systemic oppression faced by Black individuals at the hands of white society, as well as the authority wielded by adults over children. Black individuals are frequently dehumanized, viewed as unclean and compared to animals. Pecola's perceived blackness and lack of conventional beauty render her invisible and reviled by those around her. Her teachers isolate her, compelling her to "sit alone at a double desk" (43), while a white shopkeeper refuses to engage with her when she attempts to buy candy with her scant change. The treatment Pecola receives from her educators, peers, and the shopkeeper reflects the indifference shown to non-human nature, both being rendered invisible within a patriarchal structure. Her innocence, vulnerability, and perceived lack of beauty lead society to regard her as an 'objectified other.' In addition to utilizing animal imagery, Morrison also employs plant imagery to underscore the theme of female objectification.

Miss Dunion's garden is carefully curated, leading to the complete removal of all indigenous wild floras. This situation highlights a tension between the natural world and human civilization, with the latter being favored. The areas once filled with dandelions have been thoroughly cleared, resulting in a disruption of the local ecological community. Human intervention is evident in the elimination of plants deemed undesirable, such as dandelions, which Pecola ultimately learns are considered unattractive and categorized as weeds. As a result, these plants are eradicated by the Hunkie women. The existence of dandelions and their blossoms enhances the beauty of the ecosystem, and their removal, based on aesthetic judgments, causes an imbalance in the natural order. Pecola relates to the dandelions, as both are perceived as unwanted and subsequently eradicated. She experiences rejection from both the white community and her own, being confined to roles typically assigned to Black individuals, such as domestic work. Similarly, the heads of dandelions are discarded when deemed unnecessary, while their leaves are utilized for making dandelion soup and wine. Pecola contemplates, "Nobody loves the head of a dandelion. Maybe because they are so many, strong and so on" (45). Thus, when women and nature are viewed through a binary perspective, they inevitably occupy a marginalized position within society. The mind/body dichotomy, which favors the former, can be linked to the dandelion's head, as it is overlooked due to a perceived lack of value. This mirrors the societal notion that women and nature lack the reason and intellect associated with the head. Consequently, the dandelion's body, much like the female form, is sought after for the creation of dandelion soup and wine, as well as for physical pleasure. Society demonstrates little willingness to nurture either Pecola or the dandelions.

Conclusion

Eco-feminism challenges the dualistic notion of a male-dominated and male-centric society, advocating for an eco-friendly and eco-feminist perspective instead of the intolerable male-centric paradigm. As Vandana Shiva opines that, "Contemporary western views of nature are fraught with the dichotomy or duality between man and woman, and person and nature" (*Staying Alive*, p. 40). It supports all marginalized groups within society. In this novel, Toni Morrison explores the anguish experienced by women and the environment under a patriarchal society, where both are relegated to the role of passive recipients of male authority. The

protagonist grapples with her own yearning for beauty, epitomized by her desire for 'blue eyes,' which reflects her longing to conform to the standards of attractiveness prevalent among White girls in her Black community. Additionally, she endures the trauma of a forbidden act, as she is raped by her own father. The natural world also suffers due to industrialization and human exploitation. The earth's relationship with Pecola is poignantly illustrated through the failure of marigold seeds to bloom, symbolizing the deep connection between women and nature. In a society dominated by male perspectives, both women and the environment emerge as victims, as the narrator ultimately reveals:

This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We are wrong, of course, but it doesn't matter. It's too late. (Morrison, 2019, p. 204).

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