



Psychological Impact of Slavery on Human-Nature Relationship: An Ecocritical Study of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Dr. Tialila

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Peren Government College

Peren: Nagaland

Abstract

Ecocriticism can be considered a broadband of critical concerns which accommodates a wide spectrum of perspectives ranging from the secular to the sacred. Morrison's eco-sensibility which is enriched by her racial consciousness, respect for nature, respect for humanity, castigation of the oppression and exploitation of nature and black women under the canopy of colonialism is vividly revealed in her novels. In *Beloved* Morrison significantly brings to the fore how slavery and racism have shaped the meaning of the American landscape – its physical features, patterns of possession and dispossession. Slavery is an ancient and heinous institution which had adverse effects on the sufferers at both the physical as well as psychological levels. In this novel, Morrison focuses less on the destruction done to the earth and more on the damage inflicted on African American relationships with nature as a result of slavery. This paper attempts to elucidate how human view of and relationship with the nonhuman world is affected by the social and cultural space that they occupy or are compelled to occupy.

Keywords: Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, African American, slavery, ecoconsciousness

Ecocriticism can be considered a broadband of critical concerns which accommodates a wide spectrum of perspectives ranging from the secular to the sacred. Interdisciplinarity is an essential aspect of ecocriticism which

can touch virtually any discipline with primary emphasis on the human relationship with the earth (Dean 4).

Ecocriticism's stance that nature and human culture are closely linked and not separate sides of a dualistic construct remain one of its most significant features. An ideal view of ecocriticism tends to challenge dualistic thinking by exploring the role of nature in texts more predominantly in conjunction with human cultures. At the same time, it emphasizes the role of culture in nature and attends to the nature-focused text as also a cultural-literary text. There have been debates as to whether human culture should be included in the physical world and despite the broad scope of inquiry all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is not only connected to the physical world but also affects it and is affected by it as well.

Morrison narrates the effects of slavery on African American views of nature as well as the possibilities of resistance and while representing the subjugated standpoint of African Americans, she explores how the natural world has been used as an instrument of oppression but has simultaneously provided a source of sustenance and comfort (Wallace and Armbruster 213). By reclaiming a relationship with nature, she demonstrates how African Americans not only challenge definition and subvert a white national identity, but also reconstruct their history and their African culture.

The experiences and lives of the black community in America receives an emphatic note in *Beloved* where we find a black women killing her infant daughter. Sethe, a female slave kills *Beloved* in order to save the child from the trauma of slavery. This act of Sethe reveals the unheard and painful desires of the black slaves to free themselves from the evil incarnate world of slavery. *Beloved* is about attempts made by the slaves to escape from the harsh reality of slavery and the impediments involved in it. Consequently, we find the characters suffering both physically and mentally as in the case of Sethe who is a tormented soul turned into a subaltern not only by white hegemony but by her own murdered daughter.

Slavery is an ancient and heinous institution which had adverse effects on the sufferers at both the physical as well as psychological levels. The text of *Beloved* depicts the agonizing life of Sethe, before and aftermath of the end of slavery. In her depiction of Sethe's life, Morrison brings to the fore the unspeakably white-inflicted darkness and trauma which enveloped the lives of the slaves in various ways. Thus, this novel is considered to conscientiously look through the traumatic situation, recognize where the damage has been done and then finally

living without denying the scars (Lucas 39). The novel is set against the backdrop of slavery in the American South in the period immediately prior to and following the civil war (1861-1865). Toni Morrison looks at the writing of the novel *Beloved* (1987) as a revisionist history, where she projects a factual account of the fugitive slave mother Margaret Garner who killed her daughter to save her from the horrific life of the institution of slavery (Parker 1).

The narrative is primarily concerned with the painful resurrection or rebirth of buried memory. Repressed psychological motivation is crucially informed by the paradigms of master and slave, colonizer and colonized, power and powerlessness, which have dominated the lives, identities and relationships of all the novel's Black characters. This paper attempts to elucidate how human relationship and view of the nonhuman world is affected by the social and cultural space that they occupy or are compelled to occupy. For many, feelings of serenity, comfort, and affinity and memories of childhood spent in an unspoiled nature is evoked when we think about the nonhuman world and hence a positive connection is built and such scenes drive us to recognize the human place in a complex ecological chain and one tend to live a more ecologically conscious life. However, if the same subjects of the nonhuman world like trees, river, fields etc., gives only a feeling fear and trauma instead of comfort and joy, then there is the danger of a disconnected ecology.

Morrison reveals Sethe's conflicting attitudes towards nature as a result of the violence she experiences while enslaved on the Southern plantation Sweet Home. Sethe's past and the history of slavery in America illuminate African American women's complicated views of nature and how that has translated into modern day environmental perceptions. In this novel, Morrison focuses less on the destruction done to the earth and more on the damage inflicted on African American relationships with nature as a result of slavery. Unlike many white writers who portrayed nature as a space devoid of social problems, Morrison's writing reveals how our perceptions and valuations of nature are not simply 'natural' responses to the green world but responses that rest on underlying racial politics (Wallace and Armbruster 225).

As a result of slavery in the United States, the African Americans were reduced to cheap commodity along with nature and used for the prosperity of the dominant white culture which not only justified black enslavement but also denied slaves and ex-slaves from identifying themselves as American citizens. Even after overcoming the physical trauma of slavery, African Americans suffered psychologically as they try to overcome the feeling of lost

identity in a country whose land they endlessly toiled and yet did not belong. Hence, African American environmental relationships were fragmented and nature was revealed to be deeply politicized.

Morrison's *Beloved* captures these anxieties about nonhuman nature and challenges white constructions of the natural world while suggesting how these complexities can be translated into tools of resistance and healing for the black community. Therefore, it is important to explore how slavery and racism have shaped the meaning of the American landscape, its physical features, its patterns of possession and dispossession. Slaves were referred to as savages, uncivilized and more animal-like than human by the white men and they justified their enslavement with the perception that slaves were in need of "civilization" as with the wilderness, white culture saw it as their duty to tame them and make them useful (Smith 200).

The panacea for environmental pollution is forwarded by Morrison in the novel *Beloved* through the experience of a born slave in the post American civil war setting of Ohio and Sweet Home and the Kentucky plantation. In Morrison's ecocentric vision trees serve primarily the source of healing, comfort and happiness for man. Denver's emerald closet of boxwood bushes functions as a place of solitude and repose for her. At the same time, ironically beautiful trees of Sweet Home mask the horror of the plantation in Sethe's memory. Paul D finds his freedom by following trees to the North and Sethe finds her freedom by escaping through a forest. Water constitutes a significant feature in Morrison's ideal ecoconsciousness and it symbolizes psychological freedom. In *Beloved* water provides transportation, sustenance and catharsis. The Ohio river stands for the division between slave state and freedom and signifies escape as well as a reminder of the past bondage of the plantation which often disturbs the present existence of the slaves. Water being a crucial motif in African American tradition Toni Morrison at once establishes it as a life-giving and a life-taking substance.

Even though Sethe's Sweet Home held natural beauty, the slaves living therein recognized the fundamental fact that the whites associate them with the wilderness of nature. Again Paul D recognizes his status as 'a plantation animal' and not just an animal. Sethe's permanent scar at the back is a chokecherry tree which is an image that paradoxically stands for beauty and at the same time, the grotesque as well because memories of Sweet Home is indelibly materialized in this tree. The tree symbolizes the deep roots of racialised and gendered hatred which have been associated with the southern landscape.

The ideological social structures have constructed painful identities for slaves, and especially women and the only way to recover from the painful fragments of the past is to reunite with the present and with the virtual future. The juxtaposition of the culturally unanimated nature with the objectified slaves by the dominant white male prohibited the urban medium to be a natural part of the environment and black people to be a constitutive part of the civilized society and as a result African American environmental relationships were fragmented and nature was revealed to be deeply racialized within an unbalanced game of power, nature and identity. Thus, both slaves and the environment were related to wilderness, primitiveness and the unknown by the civilized white men who believed that it was their moral duty to tame the perceived chaos through specific societal codes and hence exerted their manhood over those savage and virgin territories by ignoring other cultures.

Slaves and nature are conflated and are viewed as threats unless they can be tamed and controlled by the whites. So this notion of “red gums ready for...sweet white blood” (234) is overrated in order to subjugate slaves and protect white Americans. But as Morrison points out, this led whites to construct a notion of blackness that said more about their concept of whiteness than the other races. She demonstrates the circular evolvement of the ‘jungle’ that truly begins and ends with white people. It was created to define what nature and black people were not (Peach 117). African Americans’ relationship with nature, before, during and after the period of slavery has been discussed and presented by many writers expressing different points of view.

Mart A. Stewart’s “Slavery and the Origins of African American Environmentalism” (2006), offers an extensive look at the positive roles nature could play in the lives of African American slaves. He argues that activities such as hunting, fishing, gardening and farming gave slaves knowledge of the land that was intimate and precise, and in turn had material, social, and political usefulness (Stewart 11). Writers like Alice Walker, Deborah Gray White, and Dianne D. Glave focus on the important role of gardens in the lives of African American women during and after slavery. The act of gardening allowed women to maintain cultural traditions and sustain their families, turning a small plot of land into a space for “sustenance, comfort, joy, and sometimes profit” (Glave 50).

Elizabeth Blum explores how in dealing with illness, slaves, and especially slave women, frequently used nature for their benefit (Blum 256). Many scholars have demonstrated how slaves utilized their surroundings for survival as well as resistant and subversive acts. The wilderness often served as a refuge for slaves escaping from

plantations or as a meeting place for friends and families where stories and traditions from African culture could be shared and passed along.

However, nature also served as a site of fear and violence. Runaway slaves discovered hiding in swamps and forests faced varying degrees of torture, beatings, and other violence...as punishment for escaping (Blum 251). Therefore, fugitive slaves on the run had to be constantly on their guard out of fear of discovery by their white captors (Dixon 25). African American women in particular were victims of sexual assault and rape, often taking place in nature at the hands of the white plantation owners. They also had to witness these same violent acts being committed against their children, so African American women had a complicated view of the natural world where the wilderness could serve as a hiding place for beneficial aspects of black culture as well as violence against women (Blum 253). Natural elements presented dangers as well, severe weather and wild animals were real environmental threats, so nature was constantly being negotiated because of the basic duality in nature: the same natural force, such as wide river, deep valley, soggy swamp, treacherous storm, or impassable mountain, was both obstacle and aid (Dixon 26).

Against these complex views and relationships that the African Americans experienced and shared with the natural environment, one thing remained the same – they were never given access to own land but only controlled and misused along with nature which resulted in a fragmented African American relationship with the environment. White culture relied on this fragmentation because it helped maintain a system that rejected black citizenship through denial of freedom, property ownership, and recognition of African history and spirituality. This denial has rendered nature as a white space where black slaves were owned and dominated for the benefit of the white owners and hence the dominant white culture maintained the right to define and control both blacks and nature as the “other” and Morrison laments, “definitions belonged to the definer – not the defined” (*Beloved* 225).

Sethe’s memories of Sweet Home and the abuse she suffered keeps haunting her thoughts and this affected her relationship with the members of the family. At the same time, she is torn between the aesthetic appeal of Sweet Home and memories of violence which has permanently scarred her body and soul. For example, the tree in her case, represents the memories of trauma that can never be erased which, otherwise, usually symbolizes life and family. Again, the scars on her back are an embodiment of the past growing like a tree on her body. The scars on

Sethe's back which was a result of the whipping that the nephews of the schoolteacher wielded on her, took the shape of a tree, a Chokecherry tree. Sethe says:

I got a tree on my back ... A chokecherry tree. Trunk, branches, and even leaves. Tiny little chokecherry leaves. It grows there still (*Beloved* 18).

Being a slave, Sethe, along with Paul D, Baby Suggs and other characters, undergo immense sufferings. Even with the abolition of slavery, the remains of the past lived in them through symbolic ways. Surprisingly, now and then, Sethe remembers Sweet Home as a beautiful place yet, accompanied by violent images and in her memory. The conflicting images of the beautiful sycamore trees in her memory disturbs her mind – it was a shameless beauty and she felt guilty of seeking pleasure in its beauty, guilty of remembering the delightful soughing trees rather than the boys:

Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world. Try as she might to make it otherwise, the sycamores beat out the children every time and she could not forgive her memory for that (*Beloved* 7).

The memories of slavery keeps terrorizing Sethe and even as she tries to suppress them, they just stay because she is not only traumatized physically but psychologically as well. While she is physically emancipated now, after having lived through the dehumanizing experiences of slavery, she cannot erase the miserable memories and they float around in every place and destroy her present being. The apprehension that the same terror could happen again remain a constant in her deeply wounded psyche and she tries to instill this sense of fear and doubt on her daughter:

So, Denver, you can't never go there. Never. Because even though it's all over – over and done with it's always going to be there waiting for you (43).

Sethe tries her best to reclaim her life and identity. And this is what every former slave try to achieve after experiencing a miserable sense of loss and inhumanity. While working in Mrs. Garner's kitchen at Sweet Home, Sethe looks at nature to bring her comfort and ownership on Sweet Home – perhaps the beauty of flowers could mask the ugliness all around her. She decorates the kitchen in order to make a mark on her surroundings and gain some control in her work. But she soon realizes it is a false sense of security, brought on by her belief that “Sweet Home really was one” (28). It is suddenly foolish to think that:

A handful of myrtle stuck in the handle of a pressing iron propped against the door in a white woman's kitchen could make it hers (28).

In this connection, Vera Norwood observes: "the green world cannot save Sethe from the violence of slavery. Though Morrison never denies the beauties of nature, she pointedly rejects any romantic notion that Sethe's connection with plants provides her power" (Norwood 189). Sethe realizes that the kitchen is not hers no matter what she brings into it—that space belongs to Mrs. Garner, and Sethe is merely a component, not an actor. And ultimately, the flowers she adds still grow on land that is also not hers. Again, Morrison demonstrates the complex relationship between slaves, property, and nature. Although plants and flowers may provide distraction or pleasure for Sethe, at the end, they only reaffirm her lack of agency on the plantation. Nothing about Sweet Home is hers to claim, not even the plants growing there.

Morrison's eco-sensibility which is enriched by her racial consciousness, respect for nature, respect for humanity, castigation of the oppression and exploitation of nature and black women under the canopy of colonialism is vividly revealed in her novels. Analyzing Toni Morrison's novels in the light of ecocriticism with special reference to ecology, landscape, geography and ecofeminism have satisfactorily established Morrison as an erudite novelist emphasizing black solidarity, respect for pure landscape and preservation of purity and beauty in environment. At the same time, Morrison is increasingly aware of the sufferings of the Blacks as slaves in the South with emphasis on double consciousness and triple marginalization. Whereas, double consciousness points to the binary opposition of black and white, triple marginalization refers to the exploitation of black women by black male, white male and marginalization of the blacks by the whites in general on the ground of racial hatred while equating women with nature. Last but not the least, Morrison's ecocritical vision is a powerful pointer to the people of 21st century for realizing the importance of the amicable affinity between man, woman, nature, landscape, environment, civilization and culture.

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