

## The Role of Nature in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: An Ecofeminist Perspective

By

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### Abstract

Toni Morrison, through her novel “Beloved”, has brought into focus the exploitation of women and the environment. For this very reason, the aim of the study is to examine the complexity of embedding natural aspects within this text in the light of ecofeminist theoretical framework to unravel the role of nature in this novel. The study, therefore, aims to explore how Morrison in her novel "Beloved" has handled nature and employed it in a way to expose questions of gender and race. Thus, the descriptive qualitative method was employed in this study using the techniques of textual analysis. The conducted research was analyzed in terms of ecofeminist literary criticism by using thematic analysis. This study traces the role of nature and its association with women in the novel. Morrison shows how the natural aspects when linked with women is a harbinger of true self-reliance and safety for women. Sethe, the main character, along with other characters enrich their lives with ecofeminist awareness, overcome tribulations, become almost self-reliant and triumphant by the end of the novel. Morrison through the novel asks women to develop and put forth their ecofeminist awareness in action, by promoting Eco-friendly ways of life.

**Key Terms:** Ecofeminism, Nature, Liberation, Women, Slavery, Symbolism

### Introduction

Toni Morrison is the first African-American novelist who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993 for “Beloved”. She is an American novelist, editor and professor. She wrote ten novels. Among her best known novels are “The Bluest Eye” (1970), “Sula” (1974), “Song of Solomon” (1977) and “Beloved” (1987). In contemporary woman novelists of America, Toni Morrison is the rare one who thinks highly of nature in her works. As the emerging of eco-feminism, some studier began to research these novels in terms of eco-feminist Critics.

Though few African American writers have contributed in the genre of nature writing, Alice Walker, Eddy Harris, Toni Morrison, and others deal with ecological or environmental issues. Toni Morrison, for example, expands the possibilities of African ecological writing by exploring the healing impact of southern woodland through her chapters. She appreciates the wilderness of wild life.

Many of the standard practitioners of the nature genre like William Wordsworth and the other romantic poets who consider Nature as a teacher that provides lessons on how human beings can conduct their lives (Habich&Nowatzki,2010). Moreover, Romantic literature paves way to ecofeminism by valuing the non-human world most highly, celebrating nature as a beneficent remedy to the rude world of exploiting and consuming, and blaming its perceived destruction at the hands of technological industrialism and the passive capitalist consumerism (Hutchings, 2007).

Transcendentalists like Ralf Waldo Emerson, Henry Thoreau Walt Whitman, and others are most influential poets who considers Nature much more than only passive backdrop or pretty background but rather, Nature is a living being through which human identity can be created either through intimate company or through struggle against it. They are deeply respectful of nature and through it; people can construct their own identities and their philosophies of living a life in a right way in the natural existence (Smith, 2011).

Like Zora Heal Hurson, Richal Wright, Eddy Harris, and others, Toni Morrison examines the inexplicable connectedness between women and nature. However, she differs from them in her depiction of a black people returning to the south, learning her family history and practicing a significant sense of profound rootedness relates deep relationship with landscape through wilderness in using American nature writing tradition directly and figuratively (Habich&Nowatzki, 2010).

As far as figurative language is concerned, a metaphor is a figure of speech, which involves an implicit comparison, and in Morrison's *Beloved*, metaphors communicate the associative relationship between women and nature. Through women's identification of their selves with the value of nature, they find a refugee in nature literally, metaphorically and spiritually. Women consciously seek to protect nature for various reasons, they empower the natural world and nature in turns sympathizes with them. It provides them with comfort and solace in adversity. However, both nature and women are considered as object exploited by patriarchal materialistic society. When women are in trouble they find shelter and refugee in nature. The trees, for example, symbolize an interdependence of life, which is very clearly understood by indigenous women (black American women) (Porselvi, 2016).

## **Methodology**

This research used the qualitative approach to collect, analyze, and describe the data taken from the object. Dawson (2004, p. 3) stated that qualitative approach explores attitudes, behaviors, and experiences. Furthermore, Kothary(2004,p.3) stated that:

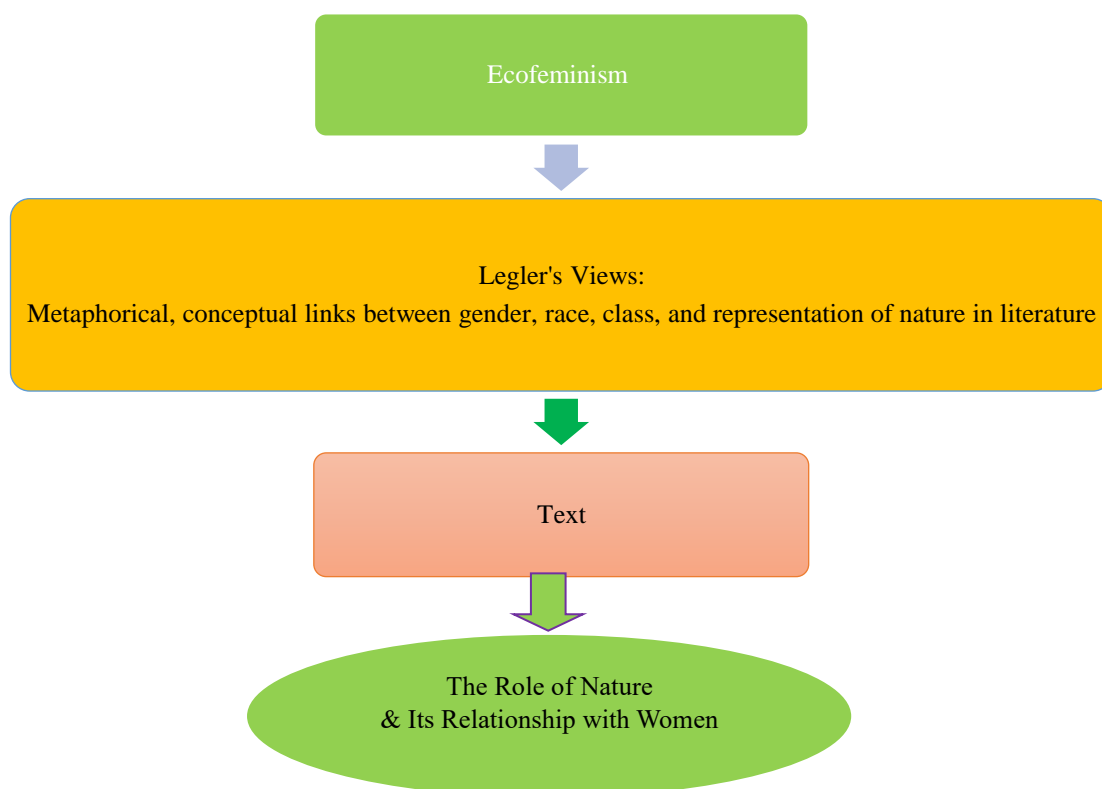
Qualitative research is especially important in the behavioral sciences, where the aim is to discover the underlying motives of human behavior. Through such research, we can analyze the various factors which motivate people to behave in a particular manner or which make people like or dislike a particular thing.

Kothary's statement explains that a qualitative approach can be used to analyze the various motives of human behaviors. Since the object of the research was novel, in the scope of literature using Ecofeminist literary criticism. Therefore, this research was conducted by using the qualitative approach with thematic analysis adopted by Braun and Clark (2006). Thematic analysis involves six phases: Phase 1: Familiarizing with data, Phase 2: Generating initial codes, Phase 3: Connecting the codes and searching for themes, Phase 4: Reviewing themes, Phase 5: Defining and naming themes, Phase 6: Reporting. According to this method, the researcher carried out some activities like reading the novel many times, selecting significant sentences, identifying, creating themes, naming themes analyzing the data, getting the findings, and drawing the conclusion.

Based on Gretchen T. Legler's views, the study discussed ecofeminist issues as shown in figure.1 Legler proposes that a viable environmental ethic shall combat patriarchal environmental ethic and shall unmask the metaphorical, conceptual links between gender, race,

class, and representation of nature in literature. It seeks to reimagine what kinds of relationships can exist between humans and the nonhuman world is part of the elimination of institutionalized oppression based on gender, race, class, and sexual preference and changing abusive environmental practices. Survival strategies in their writing implying that ecofeminist literary critic should look for these strategies in an ecofeminist text. Legler suggests searching ecofeminist emancipatory strategies present in a text. She proposes a list of possible ecofeminist strategies that may be present in ecofeminist text (Legler, 1997). The presence of a number of these strategies would aid identifying ecofeminist text as well as interpreting them from an ecofeminist perspective.

**Figure1:** Theoretical Framework



## Results

This paper explored the inextricable role and connection of nature to the oppressed human beings in general and black American women in particular as reflected in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. She has succeeded in depicting the pivotal role of nature in her novel “*Beloved*” and how she is able to connect black American women and nature literarily and metaphorically.

## Discussion

Published in 1987, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is a postmodernist novel whose plot taken from a realistic story of Garner. Morrison creatively develops it, as her backdrop to the novel. Sethe is the major protagonist, proud black women who seeks freedom from the oppression and exploitation of slavery. Her desire for freedom and excessive love led Sethe to the infanticide of her children. Through her novel, Morrison attempts to throw light on the

significant role of nature in the lives of black American people in general and black American women in particular

American culture has various views of natural and unnatural to support ideological barriers between the human and the less-than-human. This white culture depends on this division because it helps them impose a system that refuses black community. through denial of property, ownership and recognition of African history (Compbell, 2010). The fragmentation policy represents a deviant system of domination and exploitation in which the "axiological" and "consubstantial" relation between nature and human beings or between nature and is distracted. Black women were regarded natural property, which signifies to racializing and gendering the environment. Simultaneously women were culturally naturalized as a property belongs to their masters. This symbolical resemblance between black women and nature means that both of them having been extremely oppressed and treated as commodities. (Osoinu, 2015)

According to Bloom (2009), in her novel *Beloved*, Morrison explores how Paul D creates fanciful barriers and obstacles between himself and rural Southern landscapes by doing so, he can cope with and remain sane in places where he scarifies his freedom to own a piece of land. However, he escapes from his slavery several times, passes through various cities but all his attempts as fugitive resist, and deny his love for the beauty of the land that he could not obtain. He rightly points out that "He hid in its breast, fingered by its earth for food; clung to its banks to lap water and tried not love it" (Bloom,2009, p.136). He even acted as if he doesn't like the sky which was pregnant with stars. He also doesn't enjoy the graveyard and low-lying rivers. Through his strange behavior and schizoid attention to and detachment and seclusion from the land, Morrison emphasizes the personal impulse to possess land in the original place for those who are marginalized.

In *Beloved*, Morrison offers suggestive and profound images of nature to teach the reader that nature in general and land in particular are as important as the story being told. From memories on the Sweet Home plantation, Sethe recollects a patch "close to the house where the quick thing grew: beans, onions, sweet peas. The other garden was further down for long-lasting things, potatoes, pumpkin, okra salad" (Morrison, 2007, p. 192). Through the memories she spots the time. Through these images of land, she can mark the time through her commitment to the earth. She is recollecting a particular time in the past when she was a happy-go-lucky wife and free from frightful ghosts. The peas "still had flowers" which was growing too early before its proper season. Though these memories of the land, peas with flowers, motivate her recollecting the time when she found out that the Schoolteacher showed his students to human and animal characteristics of the slaves, including her own. From this day, Sethe comprehends the ridiculousness of the Schoolteacher's and the other white's vision of her since the death of Mr. Garner and sickness of his wife. Thus, Morrison places a special focus on the significance of the land to the stories. According to Warren (1994), all practices of social oppression, including racism, classism, and sexism, overlap to exhibit that the exploitation of women equals the devastation of nature. All these oppressions are ecofeminist concerns because they help to comprehend the subordination and domination of women and nature.

Through the natural imagery, female characters of Morrison's *Beloved* recognize the significance of the land and spot their memories of their lives by the land. They finally realize the soothing effect of the land. Through land interconnection, women can obtain dignity. According to Grey (2000), "patriarchal culture has defined women as "closer to nature". It is said that nature is closer to female whereas culture is closer to male. It has been claimed also

that " women are closer to the body, earth, sexuality and bodily processes"(Grey, 2000, p. 482). The association between women and nature has become literal as well as spiritual, so Baby Sugg realizes a shift in the way of air as an omen for imminent threat which the slave's catchers. Thus, nature provides a warning to impending risk.

One more noteworthy natural image that links women to nature is the image of a ripe tree beaten in Sethe's back. As she was escaping, Sethe meets Amy Denvor, white woman, Sethe is pregnant in labor. Having been attacked by many men at Sweet Home, and then crushed harshly for reporting it, Sethe quits the plantation regardless to the penalties that she may confront. The harsh whipping results in a scar on her back and Amy Denvour depicts the open:

"pus-filled wounds a" tree", A chokecherry tree. It's red and split wide open, full of sap...."Then, she informs Sethe "You got a mighty lot of branches. Leaves, too, look like, and dern if these ain't blossoms. Tiny little cherry blossoms, just as white. Your back got a whole tree on it. In I, bloom." (Morrison, 2007, p.79)

According to Weathers (2005), the tree on sethe's back works as traumatic scar, provides her with power, solace, and makes her contact with the white women who might be her savior. The chockcherry symbolizes future. It suggests the new life that will develop from those injuries. Just like chockcherry trees in real life, they flourish after particular seasons; they get better and heal as time progresses. Similarly, Sethe's tree on her back represents mysterious, yet lovely side of the future.

Not only does Morrison personify trees in the novel, but the water also is given life (Robinson, Marry& Fulkerson, 2016). As *Beloved* begins and ends with this essential image which acts as prevailing image that plays a pivotal role in living beings' lives since it has a psychological and physical effect. Through the history of slaves, water has been consistent companion for slaves. In *Beloved*, the Ohio River, for example, has an ambivalent role for slaves as a bridge to freedom well as a conveyor leading the fugitives to horrible return journey to slavery. This river can serve as a bridge for freedom not only in its liquid state but also in its frozen state. The Ohio River facilitates swift boats and floating pieces' ice in water as a medium of running away. Similarly, Hudson River plays the same role also as a crucial aqueous parallel for escapees in *Beloved*. (Hagedorn, 2004). Water, thus, is very significant symbol for *Beloved's* characters. It indicates to mystical autonomy to characters. Nature represents a psychological solace and refuge from artificial environment. Devour, Sethe's daughter, named after the white women, seeks spiritual or physical privacy in the middle of the boxwood bushes. She said

"veiled and protected by the live green walls, she felt ripe and clear, an salvation was as easy as a wish "Here she felt "as a person rather than a structure"(Morrison, 2007, p.17) her running away, Sethe meets the white woman, Amy Devor" (Morrison, 2007, p. 51).

Almost every character in *Beloved* find peace and comfort in nature, especially the main character, Sethe. During Sethe's slavery, she seemingly, chooses to remember the sight of sycamore trees over the sight of whippings and lynching to seek comfort through the tree's image. Similarly, when the Schoolteacher whips Sethe, leaving scars on her back, she refers to the as chockeckecherry tree to pacify and to reduce the spiritual and the physical torture that



scar brings. Not only does Sethe, Paul D also looks for physically real tree as relief from the tortures of slavery. That's why; he decides to love trees as they offer comfort and calmness. "Trees were inviting. Things you could trust and be near" (Morrison, 2007, p.21). D, then, chooses a tree which he named (Brother). It represents the comforting escapism from the atrocious bondage.

In addition, nature also represents a place of security and peace, a place for refuge from slave life. When Sixo visits the Thirty-Miles woman, he escapes in the secure woods before his master could arrest him "But Sixo had already melted into the woods before the lash could unfurl itself on his indigo behind" (Morrison, 2007, p. 25). Beloved also finds comfort with trees when she comes to the real world. "She barely gained the dry bank of the stream before she sat down and leaned against a mulberry tree" (Morrison, 2007, p.50)

Not only do Morrison rely on her characters' implication to nature, but also she herself implicitly and openly reappears her message by using symbolic tree imagery. In her description to the path to Clearing, Morrison depicts drooping trees as towering guards, obviously conveying stillness and security "The old path was a track now, but still arched over with trees drooping buckeyes onto the grass below (Morrison, 2007, p. 189). This novel captured these concerns about the nonhuman nature while demonstrating how these anxieties could be converted into tools of resistance and empowerment for the black community. "In representing the subjugated standpoint of African Americans, Morrison is notable for exploring 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,2001, p.213).

## **Conclusion**

According to the Ecofeminist approach, nature and women can be considered as the victims of patriarchal oppression, exploitation and prejudice. Ecofeminist practitioners seek towards a global equality and peace via eradicating hierarchy and anthropocentrism in order to achieve harmony in the world. Toni Morrison, thus, attempts to display the interconnectedness between oppressed women and exploited nature in patriarchal dominating societies. However, nature in *Beloved* serves not only as a standpoint but is more like a living being that sympathizes with oppressed human beings, reacts to the human exploitation and degradation. As has been consistent through the American history, women and nature are oppressed and degraded by patriarchal domination which fortified by the negative impact of the capitalist system. According to the Ecofeminist view, Women' oppression cannot be addressed separately without connecting it to the environmental degradation. Therefore, the question that has been addressed, whether Toni Morrison has succeeded in depicting the pivotal role of nature in her novel *Beloved* and how she is able to connect black American women and nature literarily and metaphorically. In the course of the investigation, the researcher found out that nature is as not only a background or a setting or imagery to Morrison's *Beloved* but is more like a living being that reacts to the human oppression and provides comfort and solace to them. Nature also symbolizes women and her femininity. She infuses many natural images to intensify the connection of women with nature. For future research, I recommend that scholars should identify the type of women-nature interconnection

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