



Ecocritical Perspectives in Select Novels of Toni Morrison

Maniklal Bhanja, Associate Professor of English, Tezpur College, Assam

Stella Thomas, Assistant Professor, Don Bosco College, Manipur

Maniklal Bhanja, a PhD from Berhampur, was awarded UGC Teacher Fellowship Twice and has published books entitled *American HIV/AIDS Narratives: Disease and the Question of identity* (Adyayan Publishers, New Delhi, 2011), *The Questions of Northeast India* (Tezpur College, 2015). The author has also published in national and international journals and has supervised PhD and MPhil researchers at Assam Don Bosco University, Guwahati and Madurai University, Tamil Nadu.

Stella Thomas is a Religious Sister from the Congregation of Salesian Missionaries of Mary Immaculate (SMMI). She is presently serving as an Assistant Professor and Head of the Department of English, Don Bosco College, Maram, Manipur University. She is currently pursuing her PhD in Assam Don Bosco University, Guwahati. Her area of research is African American writings as well as in Indian writings in English. She is also serving as a Programme Officer of National Service Scheme and in the year 2012, in recognition of her outstanding contribution towards the society, she is awarded (IGNSS) Indira Gandhi NSS Programme Officer Award. Before teaching in the college, she served as a Headmistress of three schools in Assam, Manipur and Meghalaya. More than an educator, she is an active social worker.

Abstract

An Ecocritical approach demands not just a scientific envisioning of the environment but also a Psychological, Sociological, Religious and Historical analysis of nature and its manifestations in the work at hand. Morrison weaves all of these strands together to produce a narrative history of African Americans a history largely ignored by white society. For Morrison nature is extricating link with religion. All of her writings show the connection between the Biblical Garden of Eden, plagues and natural Catastrophe. The relationship between nature and religion in the novels will help to illuminate her proposals for societal healing from historical wounds. In her first novel *The Bluest Eye* the connection between nature and racial hatred can be seen very clearly. The Novel *Sula* is shown the women are nurturing, creative, and destructive powers, powers that at times reach almost godlike proportion. Morrison shows that the combination of mother and God leads to disaster, 'Mother' being a feminine force that traditionally represents creation birthing and nurturing, while 'God' embodies the masculine acts of violence and destruction. The words of Lao Tzu is apt here, 'We hammer wood for a house, but it is the inner space that makes it livable'.

African Americans continue to demonstrate Africa's enduring power, its flexibility and vitality. Toni Morrison's novel gives the readers great potential for healing and growth. Teachers serve a vital role in teaching students how to be the participatory readers necessary for Morrison's novels. When they do participate actively, students discover that Morrison's novels are healing texts-for black students who experience noble representation and for white students who are provided the opportunity to expand their understanding. In *Sula*, Morrison subdues the hostile environments destructive potential by giving her protagonist the power to leave it. In her novels, the values of a unity are the measuring stick for an Individual's behaviour. Morrison's corpus of work presents African Spirituality with its accompanying ideas of duties, emphasis on nature, representation of ancestor communication, and the importance of unity responsibility –core elements of spirituality and the backbone of African culture. Africans derived the idea of the natural world as a primary dwelling for the divine. Under the canopy of the natural world, one has access to God and to the source of one's ancient properties. Morrison's ecocritical work demonstrates her belief in the interconnectedness of nature, religion and African American identity. Without such an understanding, her works seem to tell a disjointed story of disappointment and destruction; and when we read ecocritically, it offers hope for creating a better future.

Keywords

spirituality, interconnectedness, canopy, scientific, environment

Ecology is the scientific study of the relation between the organism and the environment. It can be also said as the study of the oikos or oikology. But according to Bresler, a critic says, human ecology is the study of the relation between humans and their environment. Environment is all about the 'natural environment'. Whereas Greg Gerard, an Eco-critic, defines it as "eco-criticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crisis." (Nirmal Selvamony, Nirmaldasan and Rayson K Alex 5-6). He also argues, "A 'weed' is not a kind of plant, only the wrong kind in the wrong place. Eliminating weeds is obviously a 'problem in gardening,' but defining weeds in the first place requires a cultural, not horticultural analysis" (Nirmal Selvamony, Nirmaldasan and Rayson K Alex xiii).

Everything that surrounds and affects living organisms is environment. 'Environment' is derived from the French word *Environner*, which means to encircle or surround. All the biological and non-biological entities surrounding us are included in environment. Thus environment is defined as "the sum total of water, air and land and the inter-relationships that exist among them and with the human beings, other living organisms and materials" (Kaushik, Anubha Kaushik & C P; 1). Environment belongs to all, influences all and is important to all. There is a Chinese proverb "If you plan for one year plant rice, if you plan for 10 years plant trees, and if you plan for 100 years, educate people". Education is one of the most important tools in bringing about socio-economic and cultural progress of a country (Kaushik, Anubha Kaushik & C P; 1-7).

Ecocriticism is literary and cultural criticism from an ecologist view point. Ecocritics analyse the history of concepts such as 'nature', in an attempt to understand the cultural developments that have led to the present global ecological crisis. The first use of the term 'Ecocriticism' seems to have been by US critic William Rueckert in 1978. A few works of literary criticism may be said to have been Ecocriticism before the term was invented, including in Britain Raymond Williams's *The Country and The City* (1973) and in the USA Annette Kolodnys's *The Lay of the Land* (1975), a feminist study of the literary metaphor of landscape as a female. These were informed by environmentalist ideas and asked some of the questions that were to become important in ecocriticism, but it was not until the beginning of the 1990s that eco-criticism became a recognized movement. Like ecology itself, eco-criticism is interdisciplinary in nature and derives not only from literary criticism but also from science, the social sciences, and the humanities in its approach to the study of literature.

Toni Morrison who was named as Chloe Anthony Wofford was born on February 18th, 1931. As a child, she used to hear the stories from her parents. She had a deep respect

for their heritage. Though she married in 1958, Harold Morrison a Jamaican an architect and had two children, Harold Ford and Slade Kevin, yet divorced in 1964 and left the Howard University for better visions. During this period of her life, she began her career in writing. One of her first writing was on a short story about a young black girl who dreamt of having a pair of blue eyes. Her first novel *The Bluest Eye* was published on 1970. It was followed by *Sula* in 1973 which received the National Book Award in 1975. Later on *Song of Solomon* was published in 1977 which received the National Book Critics Circle award. *Tar Baby*, released in 1981, and 1988 she received the Pulitzer Prize in Literature (Li 1-5).

An eco-critical approach demands not just a scientific envisaging of the environment but also a Psychological, Sociological, Religious and Historical study of nature and its displays in the work at hand. Morrison weaves all of these features together to produce a narrative history of African American, a history largely ignored by white society. For Morrison nature is inseparably linked with religion. All of her writings show the connection between the biblical Garden of Eden, the waves and natural catastrophe of the apocalypse and the human psyche. It is in *The Bluest Eye* that the connection between nature and racial hatred can perhaps be seen most clearly. “There were no marigolds in the fall of 1941, I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. Certain seeds it will not nurture certain fruits it will not bear.....” (Batra). The consequence is that Pecola, like so many other African- Americans, never had a chance to grow and succeed because she lived in a society (‘soil’) that was integrally racist, and would not nurture her. Split into four sections termed after the seasons, and set in the year before America’s entry into World War II, the novel tells the story of Pecola Breedlove, a young girl who has been saturated by her drunken father and whose greatest desire is to be white. “Pecola so longs for blue eyes- which she believes to be the standard by which all beauty is judged- that she ultimately comes to determine that her eyes are indeed blue and that she is therefore worthy of love. She so accepts the white standard of beauty and defamation of her race that everything around her in the natural world seems to die. It is not only Pecola who affirms this standard of beauty, however. Pecola is consistently despised by other Black children for her too-dark skin, her poverty, and her awkwardness” (Beaulieu 9).

Sula adds to this image of nature as an expression of racial self-contempt a sense of survival. Sula Peace, one of Medallion, Ohio’s renegade young women, returns to town during a plague of robins. Typical harbingers of spring, these birds signal only gloom and despair for the community. For Sula, despite her status as the granddaughter of the beloved Eva Peace harbours no love for its citizens. The town’s inhabitants, who view evil as

something to be survived much like floods or other natural disasters, project all their troubles onto Sula, the woman they judge to be evil. If the milk curdles, they imagine that Sula must be nearby. If their husbands lose interest in them, they reason that Sula must be involved. “For the black premiers of Medallion, Sula comes to represent the rose they see where they look at the rose-shaped birthmark above her eye; she entices with her beauty and stings with her thorns. And like the rose, she dies young” (Beaulieu 9).

Milkman Dead, the protagonist of *Song of Solomon*, knows well the separations in the Black community. The son of a wealthy landowner, he is disliked and despised. What he comes to understand when he returns to the rural Virginia town of his descents is that his idleness and arrogance have caused much of the judgment against him, and not his skin tone or his social standing. Having gone to Virginia to look for a sack of gold he reflects his aunt Pilate Dead had abandoned there, he soon grasps that the real treasure lies in determining his ancestry. His plans are nearly thwarted, however; as he props against an old tree, he discovers his friend Guitar Baines has come to kill him. Part of a messianic group formed to bring about racial justice; Guitar is overcome by greed and goes to kill his oldest friend to get the gold. When Milkman later runs into Guitar again, the latter is leaning against a persimmon tree, much like the proverbial snake in Eden. What saves *Song of Solomon* from being a novel primarily about the impossibility of triumph in the relentless face of nature and prejudice is that Milkman flies as he jumps off the cliff. Milkman may not be able to endure his flight, but he is proof that even when supporting figurative serpents, human beings can redeem themselves.

According to K. Zauditu-Seassie, through her writings ‘dancing with trees and dreaming of Yellow Dresses’ from the novel of *Tar Baby* Morrison inscribes indigenous knowledge, representing physical and cultural landscapes as sites of power to balance individuals and restore community cohesion. Using patterns of African traditional beliefs where nature is revered and deified, Morrison enlarges the spiritual territory of the literary canon by linking her narrative with eco-critical considerations of the natural world. “In *Tar Baby* the ways in which the natural environment interacts with characters and reflects their respective values, and spiritual ethics. It also gives primacy to the power resident in trees. As a literary trope, trees must be considered in any exploration of nature owing to their special significance in African culture” (Selassie 99).

Nature plays a key role in *Tar Baby* serving as a type of chorus that watches the events unfolding on the island. Morrison creates a world where clouds converse, butterflies become agitated, and water pushes like “the hand of an insistent woman” (Li 45-51). “Nature

in this instance, delivers nurturance because it is the earth that saves Milkman from the dead clutch of Guitar. Leaving the forest Milkman was laughing too, hard, loud, and long. Rally laughing and he found himself exhilarated by simply walking the earth. Walking it like he belonged on it; like his legs were stalks, tree trunks, a part of his body that extended down down into the rock and soil, and were comfortable there- on the earth and on the place where he walked. And he did not limp” (Reilly 98). The fruits associated with Pilate- oranges, peaches, and grapes- composed as they are of both seed and juice, couple the feminine and masculine principles to convey the ancient properties of ship and harbour, inn and trail of Pilate’s character. “The tree imagery associated with Pilate unites the princely and protective tree her name majestically creates; Pilate is both strong and nurturing” (Reilly 106).

However *Tar Baby* contains no serpent, the Caribbean island on which much of the novel is set certainly resembles Paradise. Only a few families live amid lush flora and beautiful shores. Those living on the island do not recognize the miracle of the place, however, until Son rises out of the wetland to rescue them from their inactivity and help them connect to their roots. Created, like Adam, out of the mud, Son seems to spring out of nowhere to show the island’s residents their true selves. “Son is also associated with nature and fertility. He causes Valerian’s plant to blossom. A moment before Son “flicked the stem of the cyclamen” we are told that “his kimono came undone at the belt and fell away from his body.....his genitals and skinny black thighs”. Peter Erickson argues in “images of Nurturance in *Tar Baby*” “that images of fruitfulness and birth associated with Son are designed to win our approval, while the corresponding negative images for jantine neatly undercut our sympathy” (Gates 126).

By reading Toni Morrison eco-critically, demonstrates how multi-ethnic literature offers important understandings of environmental relationships through the use of environmental narratives that have co-opted nature as an oppressive tool against marginalised groups. It is in *Beloved* that Morrison’s supplication of edenic and apocalyptic imagery becomes most clear. From the tarnished Eden that is Sweet Home to the four horsemen of the apocalypse who are schoolteacher and his band come to return Sethe and her children to slavery, the novel is permeated with religious imagery. Sethe resembles Seth, the child Adam and Eve bore to replace Abel after Cain killed him, learns, only after she hears school teacher matching her to an animal, exactly how integrally evil Sweet Home is. “Sweet Home becomes not the Eden of tranquillity and unity, but the place where the serpent not only exposed her of her innocence but also bit her” (Beaulieu 11).

Healing is also central to Jazz. When Joe Trace, the son of a ghostly wild woman who is perhaps Sethe's daughter Beloved, murders his young lover in a jealous wrath, and when Joe's wife Violet gashes the young girl's face as she lies in her coffin, it seems as though their lives, kept for years, thinking that the music in her life has ruined, changing from an upbeat jazz tune to a mournful blues ballad. "The Joe she first met in Virginia, when he fell out of a tree like an apple next to her, seems to have Vanished" (Beaulieu 11). When Joe Trace first meets Dorcas Manfred, he becomes, like the lover in the Bible's Song of Songs, sprightly and young again. He tells Dorcas that she is the reason Adam ate the apple, and that she gives him such pleasure, it is as if he is learning everything for the first time.

In Paradise, Morrison unites the joy found in jazz's Garden of Eden imagery with the racial self-hatred seen in the *Bluest Eye*. In her explanation of a small band of freed slaves who form their own community to isolate themselves from the dominant white culture of the United States, Morrison writes a scathing critique of the belief of racial purity. The intertwined fig trees that grow out of the banks of a dry riverbed will never bear fruit as long as the town clings to one notion of what it means to be Black in America.. Yet nature can also be a source of healing and resistance for African Americans through recognition of the disjointed relationship. Toni Morrison relates the effects of slavery on African American views of nature as well as the potentials of resistance: "In representing the dominated standpoint of African Americans, Morrison is notable for discovering how the natural world has been used as an instrument of oppression but has concurrently provided a source of nourishment and wellbeing" (Wallace, Kathleen R, and Karla Armbruster 12). Morrison is an inheritor of the nineteenth-century domestic novel, establishing home as a matriarchal realm and ascribing values to domestic life that distinguish it from the external, public world. "The values of caretaking, nurturing, and sustaining life are not uncomplicated or natural for her female characters; should be cultivated, practiced, and protected fiercely" (Beaulieu 9).

In Jazz, the description of Wild's domestic space also coheres with ideas about ecological influences on the lives of the people. Wild's home in the rock and its location- where water meets the shore- represent places of great transition where reeds and other plants grow. From a Kongo spiritual perspective, places where marshes meet the land represent ancestral domains where there is a concentration of power and bisimbi or water spirits. Environmental justice adds more urban-centred literatures, helping to expand and complicate notions of nature and environment. Eco-criticism would especially benefit from this last point because this would move the field beyond works that focus on nature preservation and wilderness protection. Traditionally, eco-criticism asks literary questions: How is nature

affected by environmental destruction? Why do these critics feel it is important to save nature? “An eco-critical reading of Morrison’s work determines her belief in the interconnectedness of nature, religion and African American identity. Without such an understanding, Morrison’s works seems to tell a incoherent story of disappointment and destruction; when read eco-critically, they offer hope for creating a better future” (Beaulieu 12).

Works Cited

- Batra, Shakti. *The Bluest Eye*. New Delhi: Rama Brothers, 2008.
- Beaulieu, Elizabeth Ann. *The Toni Morrison Encyclopedia*. USA: Greenwood Press, 2003.
- Gates, Henry Louis. *Black Literature and Literary Theory*. New York: Methuen, 1984.
- Kaushik, Anubha Kaushik & C P;. *Perspectives in Environmental Studies*. New Delhi: New Age International limited, 2014.
- Li, Stephanie. *Toni Morrison- A Biography*. England: Greenwood Press, 2010.
- Nirmal Selvamony, Nirmaldasan and Rayson K Alex. *Essays in Ecocriticism*. New Delhi: OSLE- India, 2007.
- Reilly, Andrea O'. *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2004.
- Selassie, K. Zauditu-. *African Spritual Traditions in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. Florida: University press of Florida, 2008.
- Wallace, Kathleen R, and Karla Armbruster . *The Novels of Toni Morrison: 'Wild Wilderness Where there was None'*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001.

The whole process of publication of this journal is carried out in a completely paperless mode. Please think about our environment before printing.
If you are reading this from a printed paper, please scan this QR code with your smartphone to reach postscriptum.co.in and read online.
Thank you

