



## Ecological Connections in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

Dr. Nistha Parashar

Assistant Professor of English  
Hindu College, Sonapat (Haryana)  
Email: scholar.nistha@gmail.com

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### Abstract

In recent years, ecocriticism has emerged as a serious branch of study which looks into ecological connections of a literary text aiming at creating an ecological awareness amongst the reading community. *The Bluest Eye*, penned by Toni Morrison is a significant text which clearly has ecological inclinations as Toni Morrison has created a gamut of characters who are either ecologically sensitive or are highly ecologically insensitive. This contrast within a deliberate scheming around different seasons makes for an interesting ecocritical study. The present paper thus is an earnest attempt to unravel the various layers incorporated by Morrison in *The Bluest Eye* to create ecologically sensitive reading public.

**Key words:** Toni Morrison, Ecocriticism, Nature, Animals, Environment.

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Marking the debut of Toni Morrison in the literary arena, *The Bluest Eye* is the first novel from the creative corpus of Morrison which got published in the year 1970. The novel unearths the poignant story of a little girl Pecola who has been raped by her father and who also yearns to have blue eyes in order to match the beauty yardsticks of whites. When the novel opens, we see Pecola staying in the house of Claudia and Frieda Mac Teer and is pregnant. The novel does not follow a chronological order and story is related through revisiting memories of the past. Pecola was raped by her father. Her father even beat her mother and burnt down his own abode. Mother, therefore, had to stay away from the family. This scattered arrangement of the family made Pecola believe that if she had blue eyes, she would be loved by her family members and they could stay united as a family. Pecola was teased by some boys and by a white girl named Maureen Peal. She paid a visit to Soaphead Church who was believed to have magical powers. Pecola asked him to give her blue eyes. Soaphead was initially perplexed and wanted to say no as he knew he couldn't fulfill his desire. But at that very moment, he saw the

dog Bob whom he hated a lot. He decided to use Pecola as a medium to kill the little creature. He gave a piece of meat containing poison to Pecola and told her that if the dog behaved strangely after eating this, she would be granted her wish of having blue eyes. The narration which moves from past to present informs that no one wants that Pecola's baby should come to this world. And, eventually her baby dies. In the end, Pecola turns lunatic and is often seen talking to an imaginative friend. While looking at mirror, she talks to herself about the blue eyes which she feels she has got at last because of the magical powers of Soaphead Church.

The novel which marks the advent of Toni Morrison in the world of letters is welcomed as well as criticized by a host of critics all around the globe. Many critics studied the debut work of Morrison from the feminist point of view. Critics like Karla Alwes, R. M. Baum, Paula Bennett, Vaneesa D. Dickerson focus on various issues related to women which have been incorporated in the novel. Psychoanalytic study of *The Bluest Eye* also forms a large body of criticism of the novel.



Madonne M. Miner, Linda Dittmar, Jane, Somerville, Eleanor, Tignor, Lynn Tirrell have explored the novel by using various psychoanalytical approaches. The concept of motherhood is also dwelt upon by many critics and scholars like Joyce Petlis, Marie A. Umeh, Pooja Kansal, Andrea O' Reily, V.M. Murray, Terry Olten. These critics have evaluated the role of mothers and their consequent effects upon the traditional concept of motherhood in reference to the Afro-American culture. Allen Alexander in his paper talks about the religious reference and preferences which mould the characters in the novel.

Despite this opulence of criticism, the critical acumen from ecocritical perspective is direly missing from the table of scholars and critics. There are some critics who have tried to link nature with the thematic network of the novel. Ruth Rosenburg, for instance has tried to associate the image of flowers with the concept of girlhood in her essay. But the study focused more on the association between two images rather than a full fledged ecocritical study. Apart from that, there is a serious dearth of ecocritical material on *The Bluest Eye*. Though some critics have discussed the role of plants and animals in the novel, the ecocritical implications of these objects of nature are given in a passing manner. The present study is an attempt to provide full-fledged ecocritical study of the novel *The Bluest Eye* which aims to link nature with the racial and gender themes inherent in the novel. Above all, it will be an attempt to make readers more sensitive and sympathetic towards nature.

At the very outset of the novel, one encounters the word 'green' which hints at the ecological inclinations of the novel. The word 'green' has been used thrice on the first page of the novel in reference to a house. The line reads, "Here is the house. It is green and white" ( p.1). From this line, the readers come to know

that this house belongs to whites where its inhabitants, i.e. mother, father, Dick and Jane are living peacefully and happily with each other. Though it is not clear, it seems that the family has some relationship with nature as the word 'green' has been used thrice which suggests some association with nature. Not only this, the use of this word 'green' can be interpreted in both positive and negative senses. It can be seen in the positive sense if one considers that adjective 'green' is used for the house symbolizes productivity and happiness which is often associated with the colour green. Apart from this, the word also hints at harmony with nature. But as one moves further, one can easily locate that the word 'green' which is linked with the white family carries ironical overtones as it castigates their exploitative attitude towards environment and satirizes their external show off towards ecological problems and hazards. Moreover, the happiness of the family too becomes an illusion. In the initial pages of the novel, mother and father are forced to smile. The house is mentioned before the relationships which clearly elucidates that property is more important than relationships. As Andrea O'Reilly too remarks, "Thus...the ideal...is fraudulent. The Dick and Jane family are not happy" (74)

Moreover, as one goes through the opening lines, one can assess that even animals like cat and dog live in harmony with the white family as the line suggests, "See the cat. It goes meow meow. Come and play" (1). The twist in the tale comes when Morrison shows a different picture underneath the external show off of spiritual harmony between human and non-human worlds in the family. There are some lines which tell how the members of the family are willing to play with the cat and the dog. Animals, however, are not willing to accept their invitation. Moreover, unwillingness on the



part of animals of the house to play with their children is indicative that possibly they are not happy with the games which the inhabitants of the house want to play with them. Thus the very beginning of the novel talks about the relationship between man and nature and relates it with the racial discourse which Morrison wants to state. If one tries to look at the broader picture from an ecocritical perspective, Toni Morrison at the very outset has dropped hints that the novel is an attempt to direct the attention of readers to ecological crisis and inhumane treatment meted out to these non- humans, i.e. flora and fauna at the hands of humans.

Infact, as one gazes this opening page, one sees that the same paragraph is repeated thrice. In the second paragraph, repetition, capitalization and punctuation marks are removed and in the third even spaces are removed. This disrupted language and structure is a prelude to disruptive relationship between nature and humans which is explicitly explained and delineated in the novel. And this successive progression of disintegration of language suggests that the relationship rather than mending is only deteriorating and the overlapping may soon happen when humans may completely encroach upon the space meant for flora and fauna. The opening pages are an index to what is going to appear in the coming pages of the novel in regard to ecological concerns.

If one still harbors any doubt, the second page brushes aside all kinds of apprehensions and clearly exhibits that nature and literature are inextricably linked in the novel which richly offers itself to an ecocritical study. Here, Morrison establishes the link between Pecola and marigolds and shows how Pecola is somehow symbolic of nature, as both of them

are finding it hard to bloom in the world dominated by cruel human beings. The narrator says, "it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow"(3).

Theforestated lines clearly show that nature is not responding. In autumn season, marigolds are not blooming. Marigolds, here become symbolic of nature. Pecola, the principal character is having her father's baby, something which is against nature. Interlinking the pregnancy with the growth of marigolds, Morrison shows that if one goes against nature, one should be ready to face the disastrous effects of Mother Nature. Pecola here becomes symbol of Mother Nature. Just as Pecola is in trouble, so is the nature. Infact, nature has been harmed to such an extent that now only some magic can save it from further destruction. Both Claudia and Frieda are worried about the pregnancy and baby of Pecola. Their hope rests only on some kind of magic which can help them in saving the baby of Pecola.

Morrison probably here hints at the ecological connections. Pecola's baby becomes the ecological inheritance which has to be saved. Highlighting the role of eco-critics in saving nature, Claudia speaks about the importance of right words, i.e. the right words from ecocritics which will certainly help in saving the environment and let the nature blossom. In this passage, Morrison highlights how destruction of nature becomes a blame game. Nobody is willing to take the onus. Everyone blames each other. Both Claudia and Frieda go for a blame game when they find out that marigold seeds haven't sprouted.

Here, Earth is symbolic of nature. Human beings are responsible for the environmental degradation. But humans often cite external reasons for the catastrophic effects on nature just like little girls who start



accusing each other. Infact, in general we forget that we have uninhibitedly and greedily extracted and ransacked so much from Mother Nature that it itself has become unyielding. Earth has become barren and unproductive like Pecola's immature womb which cannot bear a baby. Through Mother Nature's comparison with Pecola's womb, Morrison also shows how various kinds of pollution are responsible for making this earth unyielding. In case of Pecola, pollution was her father Cholly Breadlove who went against the norms of nature by making her own daughter pregnant and thereby polluting her womb. The purity, sanctity and greenery of nature in annihilated by the ever growing avarice of man who has completely destroyed nature and now, "nothing remains but Pecola and the unyielding earth" (3).

Morrison also hints at the future and foresees that destruction of nature will reach to such a point that neither the perpetrator nor the victim will survive as it happens in the case of Pecola. Pecola's father polluted her daughter but the effects of this pollution were not only faced by Pecola but also her father. These two passages at the very outset clearly showcase Morrison's green inclinations. But she is not merely satisfied in posing the issue. Rather she elucidates the problem. With the story of Pecola she expresses her environmental concerns and tries to answer the reasons of this ecological crisis.

Infact, in her afterword to the novel which got printed in 1993, Toni Morrison has herself accepted the close union of nature with her fictional output. She says, "It draws the connection between a minor destabilization in seasonal flora and the insignificant destruction of a black girl" (210). Not only this, in her afterword, she also tells how the setting of the novel in the year 1941 serves as a prelude to

the beginning of World War II for the United States which is certainly going to wreak havoc on nature and whose effects on nature are going to be multiple, momentous and catastrophic.

In order to delineate ecocritical concerns in her novel *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison deliberately divides the novel into four parts captioning them after the name of four seasons. Chapterization is done according to the name of seasons which hints at the strong nexus between nature and the story unraveled therein. According to Shail Bala, this classification of novel into seasons signifies, "the natural dislocation of life of the Africans residing in United States" (39). In the initial pages of the first chapter which is titled autumn by Morrison, Claudia says that whenever she ponders over the season of autumn she always wishes to have, "hands who does not want me to die" (10). This statement signifies two opposite things, i.e. hope and death. In fact, the season of autumn is symbolic of these two opposite words. In the season of autumn, trees and plants shed their dead leaves which on the surface level signify death but underlying this death is a hope of regeneration and rejuvenation as new leaves will soon appear and infuse a new life into them. The chapter is an affirmation of both death and hope when studied from an ecocritical bent of mind.

As the chapter opens, Morrison dwells upon the harmful effects of industrialization, deforestation, urbanization at that time leading to the consequent 'autumn', i.e. fall of nature in literal terms. Through Claudia and Frieda, Morrison has innocently depicted the sordid story of 'green' turning into 'black' because of man's desire of ownership. While going to school, Frieda and Claudia become witness to this catastrophe of environment as they hear about Zick's Coal Company and recalls how



grown up people take them to railway tracks to pick coal which can be used as a fuel in the house. From here one comes to know that not only in industries, but also in homes people make use of coal without understanding its repercussions on nature. Claudia indirectly describes the harmful effects of pollution when she innocently describes her journey homewards. She becomes a witness to the violence on nature by man when she sees how sky is full of black colour owing to the pollution coming out of industries. They can't take their eyes off, "the patch of colour surrounded by black...our feet leave the gravel path and sink into the dead grass in the field" (8).

Claudia's words clearly indicate how in the wake of industrialization these polluting agents are killing nature and environment. The last line of Claudia when read from ecocritical lens is indeed disturbing for an ecocritic as grass which is symbolic of nature has become alien, a strange feeling, a special gesture. The implication of this line can be varied. First, those signs of nature and natural surroundings have become a rarity in this smoky world. Apart from this, it also hints that due to too much urbanization, concrete gravel paths have become a common feature and deforestation caused by urbanization has reached to such a nadir that sights and feel of grass cause sensation in one's body because of its oddity in current environmental state. The adjective 'dead' which is used for grass too calls for attention as it showcases the deadly state of environment. Through these lines, Morrison successfully highlights the environmental concerns of the age. The 'dead' adjective of the grass very nicely relates itself to the statement of Claudia where she talks about autumn and the hands which don't want her to face death and disaster. The nature which is dying also looks for hands who don't want it to die.

However, insides of the house provide some relaxation from this pollution as they are less polluting than outside. Marking the ill effects of pollution, Claudia tells how outside environment is choking breath of people. She narrates how one day when she was returning home after performing the task of coal collection, she coughed so badly that all her bronchial tubes got constricted and she was left panting for breath. All this perhaps had happened because of the pollution persisting outside. Claudia's mother instructed Frieda to, "get some rags and stuff that window" (8). This stuffing of window though on the surface level seems to be a protection against cold but when studied connotatively, it refers to the protection against outside pollution sans life.

Toni Morrison also questions the role of adults in saving ecosystem. According to her there is huge onus on the shoulders of adults. They should themselves become eco-sensitive and ecologically aware and pass on the right kind of ecological attitude to their succeeding generations so that they can become ecologically sensitive. Not only this, Claudia's mother's anger on Claudia for spoiling the cleanliness of the house through her vomits and pukes is analogous to Mother Nature's anger towards humans if for our selfish interest we destroy its beauty. Morrison also hints at how humans are reluctant to leave their leisure even if it is hazardous to environment.

Though Morrison is critical of the present state of nature, she highlights how nature has been an integral part of African culture, music, lullaby, etc. Songs of Africa too have traces of nature. Not only has this, through Claudia's mother, Morrison sketched the role of Mother Nature in human lives. Though Claudia's mother got angry with Claudia for spoiling the beauty of the house, she soon came to the rescue of her daughter who was suffering from cold. She used her healing



powers to bring her daughter back to normal position. Mother Nature's love is a savior for mankind. She may be harsh at times but mother is always a mother. In this present choking environment of the world which will only lead us to death, only Mother Nature's love can become autumn and save our lives.

Ecology, however, is not merely concerned with humans and flora alone. Fauna, i.e. animal kingdom is an integral part of ecology. In the novel, when humans are insulted, degraded or abused, they are compared to animals which undermines latter's importance and existence in this human dominated world. Discussion between Henry and Claudia's mother regarding Della substantiates it, "Some men...just dogs" (11). This comparison with animals is again reiterated in many lines of the novel. Animals are either considered as low level of species or scary species bound to harm humans. Outdoors is full of varied species of plants, birds and animals are considered as something to be scared of. Young children who should establish harmony with nature drift them away from outdoors which is the real home of nature.

Morrison highlights the fact that in order to love nature truly, we have to develop camaraderie between human and nature. Secondly, humans have to forget some of their own sufferings as Pecola forgot her own agony to take care of the cat. But people like Pecola are few in the world because the world is full of the likes of Louis Junior who enjoy dominating and exploiting nature. When Junior saw this caring touch of Pecola for cat, he got so infuriated that in his fury of madness he snatched the cat from Pecola and threw it in the air. The cat, a living animal was just a toy, a plaything for Louis Junior. And, when Pecola tried to save the cat from Junior's hand, he threw the cat against the window where she collapsed. This horrifying and heart wrenching scene perfectly gives words to the brutal exploitation which animals and blacks are facing at the hands of whites. The cat eventually died.

The death of the cat is the death of the eco-conscience of people.

From the ecocritical perspective, the biggest contribution of this novel is to successfully depict the exploitation of nature by man which is degrading the ecological health of the ecosystem. The depiction of horrors towards animals has been so barbaric and heart-wrenching that it pricks the emotional side of its readers by making them feel sympathetic towards the plight of the muted creatures.

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