

## **The Interweaving of Ecofeminism and Trauma in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye***

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### **ABSTRACT**

Toni Morrison, the first black woman who was awarded Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993, in her novel *The Bluest Eye*, delineates how class, race and gender prejudices victimize the protagonist, an eleven-year-old black girl, Pecola Breedlove. The doomed protagonist internalizes the destructive obsession with the white standards of beauty and nurtures a fatal fascination for a pair of blue eyes, characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon race. The novel is a poignant portrayal of the cruelty the black heroine witnesses and experiences in society and her own home, along with the devastating effects of the Western notion of beauty. Through an ecofeminist lens, the present paper analyses the injustice unleashed against women and Nature, and their subservient role in this biosphere. It also studies the traumatic experiences undergone by the heroine, highlighting the emotional, psychological, physical, and sexual abuse that the child protagonist experienced in her short life span and how these experiences led her to insanity. The novel demonstrates how trauma transcends personal suffering, affecting entire communities and generations. It critiques a society that dehumanizes black women and makes an urgent call to dismantle the systemic inequalities that continue to victimize marginalized individuals and Nature alike.

### **KEYWORDS**

Racism; misogyny; subjugation; ecofeminism; trauma.

### **Introduction**

Toni Morrison, the first black woman to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993, is a unique figure in contemporary 20th century American Literature. She was born in a working-class family in Lorain, Ohio. The black community in which she grew up presented white standards and goals as something blacks could not achieve. Yet, Morrison grew up with a love and appreciation for black culture and literature. She secured her undergraduate degree from Howard University and joined

as a fiction editor in Random House in 1965. Her debut novel, *The Bluest Eye*, was written during her job as a fiction editor. Reviewing her fiction in The New York Times, John Leonard commended Morrison for telling the story "...with a prose so precise, so faithful to speech and so charged with pain and wonder that the novel becomes poetry." (Fox 1) Through this novel, Morrison presents a scathing attack on the hegemonic control imposed by the white society over the blacks. This article attempts an ecofeminist reading of the novel by analysing the conglomeration

of women and Nature. It also studies the traumatic experiences undergone by the heroine in *The Bluest Eye*, highlighting the emotional, psychological, physical, and sexual abuse that the protagonist, a little black girl experienced in her short life span and how these experiences led her to insanity.

### **The Bluest Eye: The Interplay of Ecofeminism and Trauma**

*The Bluest Eye* is a poignant portrayal of the cruelty the black heroine witnesses and experiences in society and her own home, along with the devastating effects of the Western notion of beauty. The novel, which is centred around the lives of three female characters Pecola, Pauline, and Claudia, delineates how class, race, and gender prejudices victimize the protagonist, an eleven-year-old black girl, Pecola Breedlove. The doomed protagonist, Pecola, internalizes the destructive obsession with the white standards of beauty and nurtures a fatal fascination for a pair of blue eyes, characteristic of the Anglo-Saxon race. Pauline, Pecola's mother, views herself as a martyr due to her husband's adultery and violence. She nurtures the white household in which she works since it matches her ideal home concept, thereby challenging her biological essentialism. Finally, through her narration, the spokesperson, Claudia, exemplifies the traumatic effects of internalized racism rampant in the country, which eventually leads to the trauma and the tragic end of the protagonist. The reader is deeply struck by the overpowering elements of ecofeminism and trauma, which are inextricably intertwined to shape the destiny of the girl protagonist.

Ecofeminism, one of the intellectual and political movements in literary theory, comes under ecological study in postcolonial discourse. This neologism, first coined by the French scholar

Francoise d' Eaubonne in her work, *Le Feminisme ou la Mort*, intends to promote the potential of ecological movements and urges women to lead an environmental revolution. Ecofeminism is rooted in the doctrine that subjugation of women based on class, race, gender, sexuality, etc. is akin to the exploitation of Nature by the egotistic patriarchal society. Ecofeminism, a coalescence of environmental studies and feminism, gained momentum in the 1980s. Its cardinal aim was to urge women to save the planet since the suppression and victimization of both are parallel and intertwined. According to Gaard and Murphy,

Ecofeminism is a practical movement for social change, arising out of the struggle of women to sustain themselves, their families, and their communities. These struggles are waged against the "maldevelopment" and environmental degradation caused by patriarchal societies, multinational corporations and global capitalism. They are waged for environmental balance, heterarchical and matrifocal societies, the continuance of indigenous cultures and economic values and programs based on subsistence and sustainability (3)

*The Bluest Eye* unveils the correlation of women and Nature through the portrayal of the physical assaults and domination they face from the patriarchal society. As Mies and Shiva argue,

Wherever women acted against ecological destruction or/and the threat of atomic annihilation, they immediately became aware of the connection between patriarchal violence against women, other people, and nature. (14).

Mary Mellor too, was unequivocal when she went on to state that

Ecofeminism is a movement that sees a connection between the

exploitation and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women. Ecofeminism brings together elements of the feminist and green movements, while at the same time offering a challenge to both. It takes from the green movement a concern about the impact of human activities on the non-human world and from feminism the view of humanity as gendered in ways that subordinate and exploit, and oppress women (1).

Hence, ecofeminism used its goal as a powerful tool to awaken the ecological conscience of humankind by connecting it with women's psyche.

The representation of psychological trauma in language, and the role of memory in shaping identities are the central concerns in the field of trauma studies, which is directly linked with the field of psychology. Trauma studies emerged in the 1990s and rooted in Freudian theory, it developed a model of trauma in which an extreme experience challenges the limits of language and even ruptures meaning altogether. Trauma studies gained significant attention in literary criticism in 1996 with Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* and Kali Tal's *Worlds of Hurt Reading the Literatures of Trauma*. Trauma involves not only intense personal suffering, but also the recognition of realities that one is yet to face. The traumatic event is not experienced or assimilated fully at the time that it occurs, but only belatedly in its insistent and intrusive return (Whitehead 12). According to a study by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, individual trauma results from:

an event or series of events or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or

emotionally harmful and life-threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional and spiritual well-being. (SAMHSA 7).

Studies illustrate that children's mental health in the initial few years of life can be profoundly and lastingly impacted by traumatic stresses such as domestic violence, child abuse, community violence and war (Lieberman 640).

*The Bluest Eye* is noted for the poignant depiction of the trauma suffered by the eleven-year-old girl protagonist. Here, Tony Morrison illustrates not only the impact of the traumatic experiences which affect the mental, physical, social, emotional and spiritual well-being of an individual or a family or a community or society, but also the natural, ecological, social, and spiritual crises that haunt the female characters, especially the black women.

*The Bluest Eye* is significantly divided into four sections which are named after the four seasons. However, it is interesting that the first chapter begins with 'Autumn' instead of the Spring season. Barbara Christian justifies Morrison's unnatural chapter division thus:

Appropriately, the year does not begin in January or the spring, but in the fall when school starts according to the rhythm of a child's life. Autumn, too, begins the book because Pecola's story will not be the usual mythic one of birth, death, and rebirth.... Hers will proceed from pathos to tragedy and finally to madness, as the earth will not accept her seeds. (140)

The interchange of seasons in the novel signifies the proximity of the unnaturalness in the characters' lives. The four seasons represent various happenings in the lives of the characters. The seasons

symbolize what the novel implies. For instance, the first chapter 'Autumn' opens with Claudia's worry over the marigold, which does not bloom that fall.

Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola had her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow. A little examination and much less melancholy would have proved to us that our seeds were not the only ones that did not sprout; nobody does. Not even the gardens fronting the lake showed marigolds that year. (Morrison 1)

Here, Morrison delineates the trials and tribulations faced by women in a patriarchal social setup. Through the symbol of marigold, Morrison unfolds the secret of Pecola's rape and impregnation by her father. The narrator, Claudia, here compares her pleasant childhood with the tragic life of Pecola. She remembers that she and her sister Frieda blamed each other for the failure of the blooming of the marigold that fall. They connect it with Pecola, who carries her father's baby in her womb. It is to share her grief that the marigolds which are abundant during 'Autumn' failed to bloom that year. Through the image of the dandelions, Morrison reveals the inexplicable shame inherent in Pecola due to her color and looks. The interconnection of Pecola's rape by her father with the marigold flowers not blooming signifies the annihilation of Nature by human beings. Universally, seed and earth symbolize hope, fertility, and nourishment, but they represent bareness and hopelessness here. The symbolic juxtaposition of fertility with seed germination, and the baby with marigold seeds suggests that women and Nature are inextricably interconnected. Women are represented as an incarnation of Nature herself.

We had dropped our seeds in his plot of black dirt as Pecola's father

dropped his seeds in his plot of black dirt. Our innocence and faith are no more productive than his love or despair. What is clear now is that all of that hope, fear, lust, love, and grief, nothing remains but Pecola and the unyielding earth. (Morrison 4)

The dirt dropped by Pecola's father bore no fruit, and this parallels the deflowering of marigold sowed by Claudia and Frieda. To Pecola, Autumn, the harvest season turns out to be tragic due to the death of her baby and, Claudia laments that in this cruel world, lust and despair rule over innocence and faith. The patriarchal society's abuse and subjugation of women also indicate the oppression and authoritarian control that men impose on Nature. Unfortunately, gender equality still exists as a distant dream for women.

In the chapter 'Winter', Morrison dwells on the humiliation faced by Pecola at her school, where whiteness is the yardstick of beauty. The recurring alienation and rejection, she confronts from the white society, and the neglect meted out by her own family brings about a gradual deterioration in her psychological state. The harrowing events in her school life leave Pecola dejected, and she prays intensely for blue eyes like her white schoolmates, hoping to escape the misery of being born a black girl. Pecola's desire can also be read from Judith Herman's perspective of trauma. In her book, *Trauma and Recovery*, Herman writes: "The core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others"; consequently, "traumatic events have primary effects not only on the psychological structures of the self but also on the systems of attachment and meaning that link individual and community" (133). This season also fills her with the false hope of getting blue eyes by sending a letter to God.

Carson states that the short and long-term effects of abandonment of the child maybe more crippling and difficult to reverse than those resulting from physical aggression or emotional neglect.

The wilful and permanent abandonment of a child by their parents may experience certain prominent consequences such as; profound damage to the ego and self-esteem; withdrawal, despair and regression; denial of reality, uncommon fantasies, or frequent searches for parental substitutes; subsequent dread of loss; insecurity and aggressive behaviour; fear, anxiety, guilt and depression (Carson 4).

In the novel, ironically, 'Spring', brings neither hope nor rebirth to Pecola and it is in Spring that she is raped by her father, thereby shattering her dreams of future. Moreover, Pecola has been denied motherly affection from Mrs. Breedlove and what she feels towards her is solely fear. When she discloses the secret of her being raped by her own father, her mother refused to believe her. When her father rapes her the second time, her distrust in her mother and the whole world is apparent in the conversation with her imaginary friend:

"I did tell her! She didn't even believe me when I told her."

"So that's why you didn't tell her about it the second time?"

"She wouldn't have believed me then neither." (Morrison 200)

When 'Summer' arrives, Claudia and Frieda are seen selling marigolds in the hope of buying a new bicycle. When they learn that Pecola has been impregnated by her father, they decide to plant seeds—the only power they believe they have—to assist Pecola and her unborn child. However, neither the planting of the seeds nor their magical words for the baby could save either the baby or Pecola. In the novel,

Claudia blames herself and the entire Africans for the tragic fate of Pecola. The sight of Pecola moving towards the garbage tormented Claudia. She says:

I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the earth kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had the right to live. (Morrison 206)

The social forces which ruined Pecola remain pervasive in the country. But, unfortunately, African Americans lack the resources to challenge the standards imposed on them by the white culture that demeans them. Moreover, her pregnancy – the result of a traumatic experience, and the death of her baby shortly after birth, led to the collapse of her mental state. On the verge of madness, Pecola imagined herself having blue eyes and was seen wandering the streets with her arms raised, as if she were flying.

The damage done was total. She spent her days, her tender, sap-green days, walking up and down, her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear. Elbows bent, hands on shoulders, she flailed her arms like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly. Beating the air, a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach—could not even see—but which filled the valleys of the mind. (Morrison 202)

## Conclusion

An analysis of the novel unveils the unmistakable interplay between ecofeminism and trauma throughout the novel, especially in the life of the protagonist, Pecola Breedlove. Her tragic journey illustrates the destructive effects of racial, gender, and class-based

subjugation, where the patriarchal and white-centric beauty standards drive her into madness. Morrison lays bare how the oppression of women and Nature are intertwined, leading to the distress and ultimately the death of both. An ecofeminist reading unfolds the deep connection between the exploitation and mistreatment that both Pecola and the nature around her are subjected to, thereby revealing how both women and the environment are universally trapped in systemic violence. The novel also delves into the psychological trauma caused by these social forces, highlighting how deeply-ingrained racism and misogyny lead to emotional and physical destruction.

Through the portrayal of Pecola's trauma, Morrison underscores the long-term impact of societal rejection, abuse and neglect on the life of an individual. Pecola's alienation, her longing for blue eyes, and her eventual mental collapse symbolize the devastating impact of internalized racism and unrealistic standards of beauty. The novel exposes how trauma transcends personal suffering, affecting entire communities and generations. Morrison thus critiques a society that dehumanizes black women and makes an urgent call to dismantle the systemic inequalities that continue to victimize marginalized individuals and Nature alike.

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