

Ecological Memories in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987)

Preparation

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Abstract :

The present paper focuses on reconstructing the African American environmental history from the mid-twentieth century writer's viewpoint. Morrison unveils the true historical incidents that African-Americans have experienced during slavery. In this regard, the study is bluntly devoted to excavating the ills of racial slavery and its painful influence on African Americans and Southern landscapes. African Americans are torn between the sweet and bitter nature. This paradoxical relationship between African Americans and nature is heavily revealed. Thus, this paper provides a new platform to examine several salient features of ecowomanism including the embodiment of ecomemory, ecoterror, agricultural knowledge, racial differentiation, women oppression and land aggression. All these facets will exclusively be examined through the lens of Harris's ecowomanism, a theory that enhances the existence of African American women and their unique contributions in the African American environmental history.

Keywords: Ecowomanism, ecomemory, ecoterror, American South, environmental history, Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.

Introduction

Toni Morrison *Beloved's* primary goal is to document the historical past of African Americans who have lived in a racist society. Morrison attempts to reconstruct the ecological past and present the real picture of their sufferings that are hidden by the white society. Such hidden parts are revealed in the novel in order to make the new generations recognize African Americans as human beings with a great environmental history. Consequently, through the lens of ecowomanism, the white society starts to realize the reality that the American South and its natural landscape are in an intimate relationship with African Americans especially during the Middle Passage. In this sense, Morrison writes *Beloved* to “fill in the blanks that the slave narratives left” (Hauss, 1990, 4). In doing so, she becomes able to voice their sufferings that are muted in other former narratives.

Ecowomanism Theory

In a similar vein, in *ECOWOMANISM*, Melanie Harris (2017) ignites the value of “honoring the ecowomanist experience,” that presents “a poetic reflection on connections with the earth in her own family’s history,” in contrast to “[t]he metanarrative of environmental history,” that lacks the focus on “the histories, presence, and contributions of people of color” (4). In this sense, *Beloved* puts a special emphasis on the missing parts in order to unveil the African American environmental history. It not only uncovers African Americans' sufferings, but also it exposes their knowledge of agriculture, nobility, and ancestral history in order to build their sense of selfhood and self-worth. This is because Morrison intends to stress the fact that the slave history of African Americans is not deniable. Thus, the paper focuses on how Morrison breaks the silence to enhance the African Americans' self-worth in line with nature.

The Method of Ecomemory

Silence is eliminated by the use of the ecowomanist method of the ecological memory that becomes a tool of resistance. Ecomemory is an integral part of the ecowomanist fiction. It involves the landscape of memory. Ecomemory changes the conception of the past because it reopens the old wounds. For this reason, it is a vehicle for revisiting and re-experiencing the ecological memories of the past. In doing so, many painful incidents have been flooded back. Remembering the natural landscape of the American South is the best epitome of ecomemory. Morrison's writing style of remembering the African Americans' ecological experience depends on narration. Carol Witherell and Nel Noddings articulate that “we learn by both hearing and telling stories. Telling our stories can be cathartic and liberating. However, it is more than that. We discover as we tell and come closer to wisdom” (280). Thus, ecomemory is an oral way of narrating facts that enhances the sense of self-definition. In telling stories, individuals feel self-esteem. It is the medium they use to make the boundaries between the past and the present possible to be transcended.

Collective Ecomemory

Beloved encompasses the individual and collective ecomemory of the Southern nature. The voice of the communal bonding intensifies its influence. “The collective memory is a kind of storage of individual blows, wounds and scars” (Ricoeur, 2006, 9). In effect, ecomemory is dynamic because it mingles between the individual and collective ecomemories, and this enhances the intersection between the past and the present. In this sense, the collective ecomemory appears as a collective thinking. It gives the voice to all individuals to express their experience to convey the message of the collective history of a community. Morrison chooses the period of slavery that is the core of the American history itself. By establishing the true historical incidents of slavery and its effect on nature and African American women, ecowomanists reach their primary goals. In other words, the collective ecomemory of slavery is the catalyst beyond achieving a collective healing, depending on

the spirit of wholeness. "Collective unmasking is an important act of resistance. If it remains a mark of our oppression that as black people we cannot be dedicated to truth in our lives, without putting ourselves at risk" (Hooks, 1993, 25-26).

Analysis

Accordingly, Morrison intends to reconcile the past and the present by using the method of ecomemory. After passing several years, the characters remember the natural landscapes of Sweet Home and how their description is loaded with dehumanizing incidents. Historically the figure of Beloved is the representation of collective ecomemory. It reminds "the whole African American community of the suffering their ancestors went through during slavery" (Deyab, 2016, 22). For this purpose, the novel is an attempt to reconstruct the historical past of the Middle Passage in order to present a better understanding of those who are displaced from Africa. It encompasses the memories of the natural landscapes in the American South and the ecomemories of the slaves who are dislocated and enslaved to serve the economic purposes of the white people. In doing so, Morrison juxtaposes the voice of the past and the present. "Sixty Million and more" refers to the "Africans who died in the Middle Passage, leaving no records behind them" (Kella, 2000, 115). For this reason, *Beloved* becomes the platform that honors the experience of African Americans. The bygone slaves are honored for their sacrifices while crossing the Middle Passage. In doing so, the sacred mission of ecowomanism is embodied. In this regard, the reconstruction of the Middle Passage is the rebirth of their identity.

Further Examples

Paule Marshall's *Praising For The Widow* echoes another Atlantic voyage to be headed to a Caribbean island. The North American protagonist Avey Johnson starts to share the community's members the annual celebration of their ancestors. They are stick to all cultural practices that enhance their sense of belonging. In this regard, both the two novels, *Beloved* and *Praising*, exhibit the

dangers of the transatlantic transportation. They intend to recover their forebears. Visiting the Middle Passage is a sign of nostalgia for home as Aldon L. Nielsen (1994) enunciates that "[t]his . . . recovery, however, does not return to a continental home in Africa but seeks its salvific renewal in the syncretic cauldron of the Caribbean . . . where Africa and America meet" (135). Thus, both *Beloved* and *Praising* share the ecowomanist tenet that reconstructs the past.

In addition, a particular significance of this paper is the focus on the African Americans' ancestral experience. A vital detriment to ecowomanists is to honor the painful experience of ancestors. Honoring the deceased Africans who are sunk during their immigration to the American South is one of the primary tenets of ecowomansim. However, the ancestors' role in the environmental history receives a little attention in Morrison's *Beloved*. Baby Suggs, the only figure of ancestors, is merely mentioned; however, before her death she teaches them the ecowomanist values, such as self-love, respect and connectedness. In this regard, the ethical values derived from the survival stories enlighten their way forward. In retelling the experience of ancestors, a number of values of moral wisdom can easily be ignited. The value of the wholeness must be permeated the whole community. Melanie Harris, in *ECOWOMANISM*, narrates her ancestors' ecostory below:

My eco-memory dates back to before I was born. I am a descendent of African American sharecroppers who migrated from Mississippi to Dearfield, Colorado during the Great Migration. In order to escape the death-dealing atmosphere of the Jim and Jane Crow Era, my grandparents sacrificed; leaving their home and family to help establish a community. Dearfield as was one of the first all Black settlements in the U.S. While the farming community did not last long (1910-1920). (Barnes, 2016)

African Americans' Agriculture Knowledge

However, African Americans are not only forcibly displaced from their home, but also they have a deep knowledge of agriculture that enhances the fertility of the Southern soil. Southern black sharecroppers change the rocky lands into fertile soils. In this sense, one of the aspects of ecomemory is the natural knowledge. Africans have the knowledge of agriculture that increases the economic wealth of Americans. Agricultural knowledge is an aspect of African American environmental history. The flowering of African Americans' contributions is exemplified in the agricultural skills they own. It reconstructs the disruptive memory of the Southern history. They possess skills related to various aspects of nature including the "soil, the development of plants and animals, the streams, the birds, and the changes of the seasons" (Washington, 1912, 155). In doing so, they have succeeded in establishing an African American ecoheritage to new generations that are the descendants of the sharecroppers who have sacrificed their sacred blood for migrating from Mississippi to Dearfield through the Great Migration.

African Americans' Oppression

Nevertheless, Black sharecroppers are deprived of buying or owning the land they planted. Cropping the cotton, for example, is extremely hard and takes a long time to be finished. To a great extent, they have no access to own lands or feel like full citizens. Therefore, history is denied in order to preserve the white identity. "What should we American farmers be without the distinct possession of that soil? . . . it has established all our rights; on it is founded our rank, our freedom, our power as citizens" (Crevecoeur, 1904, 27). The Southern lands are owned by white masters for economic benefits. During such a strict economic system, blacks live in poverty. They spend their life struggling only to survive. For this reason, ecowomanists develop an ethical vision of the ecological realm. The land is a living entity needed to be treated ethically. "It's wrong to tear up the ground and melt it up in the furnace. Ground don't like it. It's the hell-and-devil kind of work.

Guy ain't satisfied with usin' the stuff that was put here for him to use—stuff of top of the earth" (*Bel.* 1987, 53-4). In this respect, capitalism has intensified the land acquisition and made it accessible only to whites. It racializes lands and causes their depletion. For this reason, Edward Margolies (1970) attacks the capitalist's "greed that manifests itself as violence to the land, a transgression of Nature" (xiv). Thus, the social and environmental injustice is embedded in the over exploitation of both the land and slaves; "[i]t was not simply the treatment of black people as if they were part of nature that underpinned slavery . . . but in making black people coextensive with a nature that existed solely to be exploited and 'improved' by whites" (Outka, 2008, 53). Ironically they still live in poverty and suffer from hunger. Sixo, one of the Sweet Home slaves, embodies this part when he justifies his theft for eating. "Sixo plant rye to give the high piece a better chance. Sixo take and feed the soil, give you more crop . . . Clever, but schoolteacher beat him anyway to show him that definitions belonged to the definers - not the defined" (*Bel.* 1987, 224-5).

To a great extent, white masters have the right to own not only lands, but humans as well. Humans are associated to nature because both are subjugated and humiliated. African American women are traumatized by the horrors of slavery. Likewise, black women's bodies are not their property. They are sexually exploited for masters' gratification. White masters see them not as full humans; they have raped their wombs and possessed their children for laboring in the fields of cotton. In this way, lands are fertilized by the sweat of black children, men and women. Thus, they all are usurped, and ecowomanists go against this act of usurpation and enhance the virtues of respect. "In addition to honoring the beautiful connection that black women have with the earth, as the earth (earthlings) and as shared creators, black women have a particular historical experience of suffering with and as the earth" (Harris, 2016, 6). This underscores the notion that ecowomanism is an earth-based approach. Ecowomanists call for spreading morality and looking at humans and non-humans equally. For this reason, "ecowomanism embodies a religious perspective that highlights the

sacred ties women of color have with the earth and how this relationship informs moral action" (Harris, 2018, 5). It is the platform that puts the light on the issues of women oppression in line with the deterioration of the land. Both are the creatures of God who urge for an ethical treatment. The sacred spirit is found in the human and nonhuman beings for the purpose of evoking the sense of equality and justice. The salvation promotes the ecowomanist ethics of respect and justice. For this reason, ecowomanism brings an acute attention to the natural world to be valued in order to permeate the environmental justice. According to Melanie Harris's essay "Everything Is a Human Being," [Walker] "describes an ethical assertion that all of Creation should be treated as fully human and so honored so that the Earth might be saved from greed" (94).

The American South as Home

For this reason, the American South is not home for African Americans. It is the place where they have severely suffered and dehumanized. In essence, home is the place where they feel security and safety. For this reason, they never yearn to places that have intensified their sense of dehumanization. Instead, home provides the sense of security and belonging. It is the place where they live, work and bury their ancestors; therefore, it becomes the site of identity. It can be also the haven for its inhabitants on the basis that it preserves culture and heritage from being fragmented. This is because the fact that being placeless is to be homeless; it is an unsettling sense. Home is of a vital significance for being the symbol of stability since it means intimacy, security and protection. "Intimate places are places of nurture where our fundamental needs are heeded and cared for without fuss. Even the vigorous adult has fleeting moments of longing for the kind of coziness he knew in childhood" (Tuan, 1977, 148). In this sense, nostalgia for the past occurs as a result of their yearning for the past as a way to escape from the present; however, they refuse the past and accept the present life. This emphasizes that *Beloved* is devoid of any sense of

nostalgia for the Southern landscape due to the brutalities attributed to it.

Paradoxical Relationship

Accordingly, relying on Harris's method of analyzing the ecological novels, Morrison presents a paradoxical view of the Southern landscape. According to the ecowomanists' standpoint, this is known as the "ecological burden-and-beauty paradox" (Ruffin, 2010, 16). African Americans exchange a peaceful relationship with natural landscapes. However, they "bear the burden of . . . environmental alienation" (16). Through the act of ecomemory, Morrison's protagonists recount their ecological memories as a tool of "offering suggestions for the eradication of oppression in the lives of African Americans, humanity, and the rest of creation" (Townes, 2006, 159). Morrison expresses "the imperative to face a wounded past and to struggle toward healing" (Peterson, 2001, 170). The American South is the constant reminder of a mixture of feelings. Places are significant in revealing the past history because it commemorates all events that honor the ancestors and their experience. They reflect how much they have suffered in order to survive the horror of slavery. Morrison memorizes streets, flowers, rivers, trees, and other natural landscapes to assert the fact that they have a unique past. Sethe reveals this fact to Denver:

Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my memory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die. (*Bel.* 1987, 36)

Ecoterror in The American South

Apparently, ecological memories have the ability to attach them to the place positively or negatively. Nature is the source of peace and comfort. It provides humans with a positive energy to look forward and cope up with all challenges. It is the outlet of difficulties and hardships. It is the place of shelter that heals humans' wounds. It shapes their attitudes and life. It also controls

their thoughts and determines their viewpoints. It can be a paradise or a hell. A complicated relationship with nature is reflected through the characters' attitude towards it. The Sweet Home plantation located in the American South is the geographical place where they have experienced brutal atrocities. The recurring images of nature at Sweet Home reflect their past ecomemories and its influence in their view towards nature. "Morrison creates tree images as varied and contradictory as her characters that identify with the natural world" (Fulton, 2005, 192). Despite the fact that it is a symbol of relief and calmness, it reminds them of the lynching practices committed against them. For this reason, the Southern literature and environmental writers, including Paul Laurence Dunbar, Angelina Welde Grimké and Richard Wright, do not show reconciliation with the violence experienced in the American South. Unlike Frederick Douglass and W. E. B. Du Bois who have idealized their vision on the pastoral nature, Angelina Weld Grimké (1991), like Morrison, portrays the God-made beauty of the trees with the violation of lynched bodies. This is exemplified in the first half of the poem, as illustrated below:

God made them very beautiful, the trees;
He spoke and gnarled of bole or silken sleek
They grew; majestic bowed or very meek;
Huge-bodied, slim, sedate and full of glees.
And He had pleasure deep in all of these.
And to them soft and little tongues to speak
Of Him to us, He gave, wherefore they seek
From dawn to dawn to bring us to our knees. (1-8)

Likewise, ecowomanists put the focus on revealing the whites' atrocities to present a better understanding of the historical ecology of the past. Such atrocities violate the relationship between nature and black women. Nature witnesses the harsh whippings that assert the severe violence inflicted upon African Americans. Sethe's back is marked by a chokecherry tree as if the Sweet Home's cruelties are embodied on her body. White enslavers mercilessly whip a pregnant woman and leave a scar on her back. The scars on her back keep the memory of the violent Sweet Home alive. The

natural landscape of Sweet Home becomes a part of her physical body. The ecology of the South is beautiful; however, it is intermingled with deadly violence. The Southern landscape is associated with violence, blood and death. Her back becomes the site of all wounds she has experienced there. "Although the mother's body, as the site of history, is made to signify a new [...] it is also the trace of an unbearable past" (Badt, 1995, 575). The racial history is written on her body that witnesses the multilayered oppression they suffer from. It is a rooted tree that documents their challenges.

Ecomemory as a Healing Tool

In a similar vein, a part of the ecowomanist standpoint is the ecomemory instigated to heal the wounds of the past. The process of healing starts with recalling their ecomemories. It brings a therapeutic healing. The reconstruction of the environmental history brings relief. Ecomemory provides the possibility of striking a balance between the past, present and future. Recalling the ecological memories of the South is the cornerstone for a meaningful life. Instead of living in disorder, African Americans confront their haunted ecological memories. It puts an end to the fear of past events. Putting the past in the right place is the solution for fulfilling a promising present and future. Morrison, as an ecowomanist writer, views that "a keen sense of history is crucial for their characters and for their readers, not to be burdened by the past, but to tell a story of the past that can revitalize the present moment" (Peterson, 2001, 51). In this regard, ecomemory works as the motivator that releases their brain's chains not to be "interested in the future. Loaded with the past and hungry for more, it [leaves] her no room to imagine, let alone plan for, the next day" (*Bel.* 1987, 70). They no longer repress the Sweet Home plantation's brutalities because running away from the past is not the solution to have a stable life. The tool for a balanced life is to recount the shared ecomemories and think about the ways of overcoming them. Thus, ecomemory works as an eye that raises their awareness and then

helps to perceive the fact that "nothing better than that to start the day's serious work of beating back the past" (73).

Conclusion

To sum up, the novel involves a pedagogical message that urges white readers to respect the African American environmental history and recognize their sufferings. It brings to the light the role that ecowomanists play in urging others to spread justice and peace. The novel is a tool for reviving the brutality of slavery and its effects on human and non-human beings. It offers a new understanding of the connection between both from an ecowomanist angle.

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الذكريات البيئية ف رواية محبوبة (1987) لتوني مورسون

مستخلص:

تركز الورقة البحثية على اعادة بناء التاريخ البيئي الأفروأمريكي من وجهة نظر كاتب منتصف القرن العشرين. تكشف موريسون عن الأحداث التاريخية الحقيقية التي شهدها الأمريكيون أصحاب الأصول الأفريقية أثناء فترة العبودية. وفي هذا الصدد، يكرس البحث الكشف عن العبودية العنصرية وتأثيرها المؤلم على الأفروأمريكيين وايضا تأثيرها على البيئة الطبيعية ف الجنوب الأمريكي. لقد كانوا الأفروأمريكيون ممزقون بين الطبيعة الساحرة والمميتة. ولذلك يقوم البحث بكشف هذه العلاقة المتناقضة بينهما. وبالتالي، توفر هذه الورقة البحثية منصة جديدة لدراسة العديد من السمات البارزة للمنظور النسوي- البيئي بما في ذلك تجسيد الذاكرة البيئية، والإرهاب البيئي، والمعرفة الزراعية، والتمايز العنصري، واضطهاد المرأة والعدوان على الأرض. سيتم فحص كل هذه الجوانب حصرياً من خلال عدسة المنظورالنسوي- البيئي لهاريس ، وهي نظرية تعزز وجود النساء الأمريكيات المنحدرات من أصول أفريقية ومساهماتهن الفريدة في التاريخ البيئي الأفروأمريكي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المنظور النسوي- البيئي، الذاكرة البيئية، الإرهاب البيئي، الجنوب

الأمريكي، التاريخ البيئي، محبوبة لتوني موريسون.