

Symbols of Ecofeminism in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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Abstract

Ecofeminism is combination of a philosophical and political theory and a movement which juxtaposes ecological concerns with feminist ones regarding both as repercussions of the male domination of society. Ecofeminism serves as a symbol in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. Women suffer disproportionately more and are likely to endure more hazards and tribulations than men. Many feminists agree that ecology is an issue of feminism, yet they opine differently over the nature and desirability of ecofeminism. Ecofeminism roots its fundamental claims on certain beliefs that point to the existence of important networks between the oppression of women and that of nature. Morrison discusses how 'earth' and Pecola both remain unsuccessful to produce. The earth's inability to produce that year and Pecola's to produce the child she carries in her womb have been shown in parallel, making it a symbol of ecofeminist theme.

Keywords: substituted Li ferrite, magnetostatic and spin waves, microstrip array antenna, X-band frequency range

Introduction

The Bluest Eye is a work of complex symbolism right from the very first page of the text. The novel begins with a replica of content from a primer prevalently read at elementary level in American schools. This rhyme-like text is highly symbolic and paves way for the reader to silt in his/her mind that despite this novel being a story of a Black American family, there is no mention of the blacks in the given rhyme. This is symbolic of how blacks are negligible, avoidable and disposable in the mainstream American society constituting white families which further comprise of a white father, a white mother and their white son and daughter –with white names – Dick and Jane. At first reading, one would not find an easy relation between this text and the novel. The initial text actually has everything that the novel has not. The fact that this text has been given thrice on the page – one using proper grammar and punctuation, second time, without punctuation and yet another time with blank spaces removed – which implies that there are certain characters in the novel who psychologically fight with the demons of their identity that fear them. One would find the family name of Pecola's father 'Breedlove' highly symbolic. Cholly, who is unable to 'love' and is only capable of breeding, breeds with his own daughter doing the most heinous of the things in the blurry thoughts of love and lust. While it is easy to find many other symbols in the novel – some on the surface, others concealed a bit deeper – it is still interesting to find how symbols of ecofeminism endeavour to convey new insights of feminism in relation to those of ecological concern.

Ecofeminism is combination of a philosophical and political theory and a movement which juxtaposes ecological concerns with feminist ones regarding both as repercussions of the male domination of society. It reveals the relationship between woman and nature where the feminist aspects such as childbirth and mood swings are synonymous with creation and

seasons with many other features including fertility, silence and symbolic protests as points of common characteristics. To begin with, ecofeminists tend to analyse on the basis of gender as a category whereas a feminist approach also uses gender analysis as its launching pad and this analysis is achieved by preliminary narrative and investigation through the lens of gender. Even though there are many forms of oppressions, including those related to the binaries of the white and the black, the rich and the poor, the youth and the old, the affluent and the devastated, yet in their discussions of interrelated systems of unwarranted domination, ecofeminists highlight claims about women as women. This does not imply that the gender oppression is somehow of more significance than all or any of the other forms of repression. This just means that a mere focus on women reveals vital characteristics of intersecting systems of human domination. Women's gender roles doubtlessly intersect with particular environmental issues in a way those of men usually do not. Gaard and Murphy define ecofeminism as:

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. (Gaard and Murphy 2)

Women suffer disproportionately more and are likely to endure more hazards and tribulations than men. Many feminists agree that ecology is an issue of feminism, yet they opine differently over the nature and desirability of ecofeminism. Ecofeminism roots its fundamental claims on certain beliefs that point to the existence of important networks between the oppression of women and that of nature. It is important to understand the nature to map the connections

of these networks in order to understand the repression of women and that of nature. Ecofeminists are also of the view that every feminist theory must comprise an ecological perspective and vice versa. Ecofeminist theory has brought into sharp focus the links between development and gender. It has highlighted the fact that the violence against nature and against women is built into the dominant development model. Ecofeminist literature portrays the historical exploitation and domination of women and nature as going hand in hand, and both are seen as victims of development. Any harm done to nature, as per the ecofeminist thought, harms women equally, since women are considered closer to nature than men.

Ecofeminists opine that much before the scientific revolution, the origin of oppression of nature had already spread its roots. They offer many an approach to comprehend the current functioning of global oppression of varied kinds – at the center being patriarchal religion. Goddess-worshipping cultures paved way to the worshipping of male deities in different cultures. In the goddess religions, both the earth's and woman's fertility used to be seen as sacred. There was no gender hierarchy and divinity was seen as immanent. Women were compared to fields which would gestate and bear the male seed. With the advent of patriarchal religions there was a shift from goddess-centered cultures to male deities. The patriarchal domination of both nature and woman was divinely commanded. According to another theory, a woman's reproductive capacity and life bearing activities stood in a sharp contrast to the death oriented activities of male culture. The phrases like 'the rape of the nature', 'mother nature' and 'virgin forests' further feminized nature and woman. Ecofeminists claim that environmental issues are feminist issues because it is women and children who are the first to suffer the consequences of injustice and environmental destruction. Ecofeminists are also equally concerned with environmental racism defined as 'the dumping or placement of environmentally hazardous substances or facilities in the communities of color around the world, primarily because of the race and powerlessness of people in those communities.

The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison is an epitome of all the concepts mentioned above like patriarchy, reproduction, oppression and environmental racism. The novel mirrors issues and theories like rejection, beauty, love, sex, racism, feminism and eco-feminism. It expresses the theme of disruption and unnatural disturbances of seasons connected to eleven-year old girl protagonist Pecola's life. It is a tale of a black girl who is a victim of racial rejection, obsessed with the thought of having a pair of blue eyes through the means of prayer.

Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year she had prayed. Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope. To have something as wonderful as that happen would take a long, long time. (Morrison 45)

The novel focuses about being hated and resistance to contempt of others by the most vulnerable and delicate member of the society, a girl child. The text is divided into four seasons of autumn, winter, spring, summer and portrays disorder. The structure of double narrative adds to complexity

of the themes of the novel.

The prevalent themes of the novel such as psychological acceptance of physical ugliness, disordered lives, disorder of seasons, unyielding earth and forbidden sex make it a powerful work. It opens with a botanical aberration, a skip, in the natural order of things. The opening provides the stroke that announces something more than a secret shared, but a silence broken, a void filled, an unspeakable thing spoken at last. It reveals aspects connected to eco-feminism like exploitation of female by the male, childbirth, creation and domination of patriarchal society. The novel brings out a similarity between Pecola and Earth, her disordered life and disordered seasons, barren and unyielding Pecola and Earth. It draws connection between a minor destabilization in seasonal flora and the insignificant destruction of a black girl. The disorder of seasons here is linked to the disorders of Pecola's life. The opening phrase of the novel 'Quiet as its kept' reveals a shocking information. As the marigolds did not bloom in the season of fall, Claudia the child narrator narrates that 'it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow'. There is a speculation on the disruption of nature as being a social disruption with tragic individual consequences. The earth stops yielding and so does Pecola. The shattered world of Pecola is held together by the seasons. The seasons reversely react to the annihilated life of Pecola. But for the world and society it becomes a mere insignificant issue.

The chief claim of ecofeminism is that it is no longer possible to discuss environmental change without addressing social change. Moreover women's oppression cannot be addressed without addressing environmental degradation. That these two worlds, the human and the natural are inextricably interconnected, may seem so obvious that it's hard to imagine that they are usually addressed separately. Earth and nature symbolize woman and her femininity. As a woman experiences menstruation, fertility, childbirth and creation, earth too creates and changes according to the seasons. Earth and woman are synchronic and are exploited and harassed by the male domination. Though it is evident that both earth and woman are quiet as they are kept, the fight and protest of them is symbolic and destructive.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola is a black girl rejected and disliked for her ugliness who has internalized the concept of beauty of the white girls and her own ugliness because of her black complexion and disproportional features. Pecola goes insane craving for blue eyes which symbolize beautiful life, acceptance and love in the white American society. This unfortunate girl is condemned by her mother, harassed and exploited by the white boys and girls and is brutally raped by her father. There is no meaning in her existence and life is all chaos and disorder for her. She is introduced by her friend Claudia, the child narrator of the novel in a shockingly bewildering way. The very striking paragraph in the beginning provides the stroke that announces something more than a secret shared, an unspeakable thing spoken at last. It signifies the end of the novel and summarizes the complete story of Pecola and the reasons for her ruin. To quote,

"Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola

was having 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's did. It was a long time before my sister and I admitted to ourselves that no green was going to spring from our seeds. For years I thought my sister was right: it was my fault. I had planted them too far down in the earth. It never occurred to either of us that the earth itself might have been unyielding. We had dropped our seeds in our own little plot of black dirt just as Pecola's father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt. Our innocence and faith were no more productive than his lust and despair. What is clear now is that of all of that hope, fear, lust, love and grief, nothing remains but Pecola and the unyielding earth". (Morrison 4)

The above paragraph describes the reason for marigolds not blossoming that year and that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby. The reason is quite absurd, bizarre and wild. No sign of green or life is seen around. The earth and Pecola are barren and deserted. The rape of Pecola represents the rape of earth. Though the seeds are dropped in the plot of black dirt of earth and Pecola's womb, they fail to be productive and fruitful. The innocence and faith of Claudia and Frieda are destroyed by the lust and despair of Pecola's father. The seeds were planted too deep in the earth, so deep that they died of suffocation. There was no air of love and freedom for them. No sign of green or life would spring from the seeds planted in the womb of earth and Pecola. The beginning of the novel justifies the end and the conclusion that, of all that hope, fear, lust, love and grief nothing remains but death and hopelessness.

The division of the novel into four seasons is significant one. The names of the chapters take after those of the seasons – autumn, winter, spring and summer. It begins with autumn and ends with summer. The seasons and the lives of characters in the novel go hand in hand. The season fall here implies the fall of life. The autumn season in the novel denotes sorrow and love, while Frieda sings 'when the deep purple falls over sleepy garden walls, someone thinks of me'. Autumn symbolizes productive and fructifying pain. Claudia turns nostalgic with warm memories of love like the alaga syrup which coated her chest and soothed the pain. She remembers how, when she had cold and cough someone entered the room, corrected the flannel and rested hands on her forehead. So when she thinks of autumn, she thinks of those hands that don't want her to die. The reference to dandelions in the novel reveals the inner thoughts of Pecola. She observes the cherished and loved images of dandelions. She wonders why they are treated as mere weeds and not as flowers. The dandelions were considered to be ugly and not pretty enough to be grown in the garden and so pulled off. Her experience of inexplicable shame and rejection is expressed through dandelions. She looks at them affectionately but she does not receive the same. She concludes by assuming herself as a mere ugly weed.

A dart of affection leaps out from her to them. But they do not look at her and do not send love back. She thinks, "They are ugly. They are weeds." (Morrison 37)

The season also reflects that there were no marigolds and the seeds sown by Claudia and Frieda did not sprout. The earth did not yield. The seeds shriveled and died and Pecola's baby too. It also describes their house, Pecola's mother and father and their relationship and Sammy, her brother. This part also throws light on how all of them wore a cloak of ugliness and tolerated themselves. It is in this season Pecola begins craving for blue eyes. The ugliness of the family has been defined by Morrison in these lines:

Except for the father, Cholly, whose ugliness (the result of despair, dissipation, and violence directed toward petty things and weak people) was behavior, the rest of the family—Mrs. Breedlove, Sammy Breedlove, and Pecola Breedlove—wore their ugliness, put it on, so to speak, although it did not belong to them. The eyes, the small eyes set closely together under narrow foreheads. The low, irregular hairlines, which seemed even more irregular in contrast to the straight, heavy eyebrows which nearly met. Keen but crooked noses, with insolent nostrils. They had high cheekbones, and their ears turned forward. Shapely lips which called attention not to themselves but to the rest of the face. (Morrison 38)

The next season winter opens with a description of Claudia's father. His facial features are compared to the season. He is a cold man lacking warmth. Winter has permanently settled in his face. His snowy eyes threaten to avalanche, his bent eyebrows are like leafless trees or obsolete with no expression. His skin is yellow and pale and his head frozen with darkness.

My daddy's face is a study. Winter moves into it and presides there. His eyes become a cliff of snow threatening to avalanche; his eyebrows bend like black limbs of leafless trees. His skin takes on the pale, cheerless yellow of winter sun; for a jaw he has the edges of a snowbound field dotted with stubble; his high forehead is the frozen sweep of the Erie, hiding currents of gelid thoughts that eddy in darkness. (Morrison 58)

Winter was also a season of stiffened hateful knot for Claudia, Frieda and Pecola. They waited for spring. But the knot was loosened and disrupted by a new girl in the school named Maureen Peal. She is considered as a disrupter of seasons and compared to spring season. Maureen's beauty had the power to disturb and alter the seasonal moods. This season also draws attention to Pecola's school life and humiliations. Claudia's thoughts as a narrator generalizing all white 'beautiful' girls contrast with the generic attitudes of the white towards the black.

The spring touches the lives of Pecola, Claudia and Frieda strangely. As Claudia explains, spring meant a change in whipping style. They are beaten differently. They are whipped by the twigs which are thin, green and unbreakable. This season reminds her of painful whippings and new green switches that lost their sting long after the whipping was over. The spring season can be defined as the important one as there are many incidents connected to it. Pecola's mother Pauline and father Charles Breedlove and their breaking married life

are discussed here. It is in this thin light of spring that Pecola is raped by her father.

The storms, the violent sudden storms of the summer frightened Claudia. Even the thought of summer frightened her. The summer symbolizes tightness of strawberry, dust, lowering skies, storms, parched days, sticky nights. The line 'seasons become the Moirai of our lives' represents seasons as the fates of their small lives. The unnaturalness of seasons reveals the unnaturalness and disordered fates and lives. This season also portrays how people rejected Pecola who was doomed to death and how she was found amidst the marginalized garbage. It's only Claudia and Frieda who prayed for Pecola's baby. They planted the seeds and said magic words for the baby but the baby does not survive. Pecola is maddened with blue eyes and assumes and hallucinates that she has blue eyes. The thought that she is ugly with her features and colour is so inherent to her that she cannot accept that even if she managed to get *The Bluest Eye*, she would never be accepted as 'beautiful' against the notion of beauty standardized by the white American society.

At the end of the novel, the main statement gets reverse as Claudia mentions 'I talk about how I did not plant the seeds too deeply', where as in the beginning she claimed that she had planted them too far down in the earth. In the conclusion it is realized by Claudia that it was the fault of the earth and not of the seeds. That year the entire earth was hostile to the marigolds. The earth had rejected certain kinds of seeds and flowers. It failed to bear fruits. But when earth itself rejects, one has to verdict that victim or seeds had no right to live. Victims are blamed to be wrong. But it was too late to matter and too late to be grown, at least on the edge or at the end of the city among the garbage where the seeds were assassinated. So it was an autumn, a spring, a winter and a summer, all without the happening of them. It is believed that when something forbidden happens, the nature reacts to it by being hazardous. A daughter being raped by her father and made pregnant by him was the most forbidden sin. As a reaction and consequence the earth too stops yielding. It backgrounds the illicit, traumatic and incomprehensible sex coming to its dreaded fruition. The readers are sure to be bewildered and stunned. The way the novel is narrated by Claudia not only touches the reader but also moves them into tears. Using soil as a metaphor for Pecola's womb, Claudia's narration stirs conscience as well as the consciousness by accepting in case of Pecola that she bore them. The child narrator shares:

This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We are wrong, of course, but it doesn't matter. It's too late. (Morrison 186)

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