



## Ecofeminism in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*

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### KEYWORDS :

#### Introduction: The Feminism and Ecology Alliance

Literature has two qualities that have always facilitated in the increase in its followers and adherents both. Firstly, it is a discipline which remains connected with all other disciplines of humanism, and secondly, as a result of first, it has always been closer to the issues relevant to human beings. With the advent of Literary theories these two qualities are being more deeply rooted in literature because they have brought a huge change in perspective by which Literature is studied. Before the advent of Literary theories, 'Liberal Humanism' sought a clear, non-political stand of Literature thereby claiming it to be 'organic' and 'self-sufficient'. But now the trend has changed significantly and Literary theories have been successful in showing text having a pervasive interest in socio-political aspect of life.

Theories of Literature started making its presence felt with full sway only after post second world war. Each decade observes a 'wave' in theory starting from 1960's. A number of theories were born and reborn one after another sweeping away the linguistic approach of Liberal Humanism and took their turns in taking over the ruling throne of Literary criticism and theory. In 1978 William Reuckert wrote the essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism." In 1974 Francois d' Eaubonne, a French feminist, wrote the book *Le Feminisme ou La Mort* and brought out the term Ecofeminism in that. This is a movement that sees a deep connection between the exploitation of our natural environment and the suppression of women. In the words of Mary Mellor, "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, exploit and oppress women." (Mellor, 2007) The two terms remained dormant until 1980's until the environmental concerns started to become a major part of global concerns.

Ecofeminism sees a clear relation between nature and women as both are the nurturer, breeder and feeder. Indian Ecofeminist Dr. Vandana Shiva sees 'development' as a form of subordination of women. The combat of this subordination is possible through *Prakriti*, which is, "the feminine principle as the basis for development which conserves and is ecological. Feminism as ecology, and ecology as the revival of *Prakriti*—the source of all life." (Shiva, 1989) Prynka Chanda puts it very aptly that, "The disruption and transformation of the static dualism of nature/culture into a more dynamic and dialectical relationship between the two sides of the binary is pivotal to gender inclusiveness in terms of women's material position as (ecological) citizens and valuing women's (care) work which "naturally" links women to caring for the earth." (Chanda, 2014)

#### The Theory

Before attempting an ecofeminist study of Toni Morrison's novel, it is imperative to understand the concept that Ecofeminism is. In the more recent form of Ecofeminism, the ecofeminists have begun to see the interconnection between sexism and the domination of nature. Both, nature and women are termed as feminine and thus are in binary opposite to 'Masculinity'. The notion of the proximity as well as similarity between women and nature arrives from the assumption of radical feminists that women are nurturing as nature itself.

Swrnalatha Rangarajan writes about ecocriticism that it "articulates

the symbiotic relationship between land and landscape, text and terrain, and recognizes that language is not separate from the world of nature." (Rangrajan, 2009) Paul Goring, Jeremy Hawthorn and Domhnall Michell explain Ecocriticism in simple terms that it is, "an earth centered approach to literary works, especially works that share the critic's interest in the physical environment." (Goring et al, 2010) In English Literature, the concern with nature and devastating effects of urbanization dates back to the time of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798).

Ecofeminists see environment and women equally being subordinated for man's use. Carolyn Merchant explains that, "Social and socialist ecofeminism ground their analysis in capitalist patriarchy. They ask how patriarchal relations of reproduction reveal the domination of women by men and how capitalist relations of productions reveal the domination of nature by men." (Merchant, 1992)

#### The Writers in Concern

Environmental issues are of grave concern in the present scenario. To save environment and to be concerned about environmental issue is not only the duty of Government or environmentalist but of each and every citizen of this world. We are facing many problems because of environmental issues like Global warming, climate change and many other disasters. This had affected the entire humanity and so now people are very much concerned about the environmental issues. And as people in all the fields are concerned about it, the literary world is not apart from this. In the past we have seen a deep love for nature in the works of poets like Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats and many other poets and novelists. Contemporary writers are showing their concern about environment in their writings which are in the form of prose-work, memoirs, poems and also in the novels.

There are many writers not only in India but the world over, who have reflected their concern for the environment in their literary works. Toni Morrison is one such writer, who belongs to Afro-America. She is the first black woman to receive a Nobel Prize in the year 1993. Toni Morrison has written nine novels. Morrison is a black feminist writer who writes about the intersection of race, class and gender in her novels.

The latest novel of Morrison, *A Mercy* (2008) sees the rising of an ecofeminist in the novelist. The first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), contained the episodes that showed the interest of Morrison in ecology in the species and beings equally ignored as well as oppressed as women: animals and environment. In this novel she attracts reader's attraction towards a cat which is badly tortured by a boy and finally is killed by him. As Morrison grows as a novelist we can observe a growing penchant for the things of the nature that are exploited by the humans.

In *Tar Baby*, Morrison's fourth novel, there is a story set in the lap of beauty of nature. Morrison is successful in showing us the benefits of being close with nature instead of devastating it. In *A Mercy*, there is a clear implication of the exploitation of women, animals and nature by men.

But in her earlier novels Morrison's concerns towards animals and plants were not as manifest as in this novel. *A Mercy* can be seen as study in ecofeminism because Morrison has shown in a most

manifest way the environmental crisis that the world is undergoing. Here she depicts at several places how ecological balance is being disturbed by mankind, she shows how animals are used unemotionally.

### **The Mercy in its Ecofeminist Instances.**

The story of *A Mercy* comprises of multiple open ending stories of several characters. It tells about the journey of Jacob Vaark, a businessman who goes to meet D'Ortega, the Portuguese plantation owner, in the New World. Vaark owns two women slaves. First one is Lina who is a native American girl and second Sorrow. They both are orphan. The novel opens with a sixteen years old black girl, Florens. Florens recollects her story that how she was given to Jacob Vaark by her master in settlement of a debt. She recounts how her mother offered her instead of herself because she had a baby boy whom she had to nurse. Florens falls in love with a black blacksmith who was never enslaved. She narrates about her journey to meet her love that ends in only despair.

In this story, Morrison has hinted at several instances her deep concerns that go beyond her specialization of black feminism. She shows the utter abuse of nature, animals and plants both, in the hands of man.

When Jacob Vaark goes to meet D'Ortega at latter's house she borrows a horse named Regina. The path of the newly developed Virginia is still not in sound condition. Jacob senses danger around him all the time. On his way he sees a young raccoon stuck in a tree break. He dismounts the horse to free the raccoon. He tries to be, "as gentle as possible, avoiding the claws and jaws of the frightened animal. Once he succeeded, the raccoon limped off, perhaps to the mother forced to abandon it or more likely into other claws." (Morrison, 2008) Here Morrison draws the attention of her readers towards two things. First is the pain and agony of that young raccoon that was caught badly in the tree. Being an animal there is no worth of its pain. Nor it could cry and beg like human beings. Only a true human like Jacob could bring it relief of liberation. Secondly, it known that being young and alone the raccoon could easily fall prey to some other animals or man. The novelist has subtly compared raccoon with Florens. The mothers of both the species, one a helpless animal and the other a black girl, could do nothing to save them.

At one point Morrison depicts the savage like behavior of man towards animals. When Jacob returns to Pursey's tavern from D'Ortega's house he sees a man beating his horse to its knees. Few men take the man from there but the scene of beating the horse pains Jacob Vaark. Morrison tells us that Jacob feels bad, "not only because of the pain it inflicted on the horse, but because of the mute, unprotesting surrender glazing its eyes." (Morrison, 2008) Morrison proves herself to be on a serious mission of listening to the unspeakable voice of animals.

Advocating the cause of animal nature and women strengthens the work of Morrison. At one instance she juxtaposes the condition of an eagle and Florens and Leena to show how they all are one, the same, the helpless, the hopeless and the exploited ones. Lina tells the story of an eagle to Florens. The eagle lays eggs beyond the reach of snakes and hunters. She fiercely protects her eggs. But one day a man reaches the place and decides to take the eggs. This frightens the eagle. Still she tries hard to save her eggs but the man raises his stick and hits the eagle with full strength. It falls leaving the eggs alone. Here Florens asks Lina, "Do they live?" Lina replies, "We Have." (Morrison, 2008) Morrison shows how the plight of women and animals and birds are same in the hands of man.

Like wise in the work of Morrison the cause of trees and plants also find a voice and a cause. At many places in the novel she has talked about the exploitation of nature, of plants and trees. She writes that the building of Jacob Vaark's new house "required the death of fifty trees." (Morrison, 2008) She writes and really means that the felling of trees means the death of trees and nothing less. And that the life of trees is as important and precious as that of a human being.

### **Conclusion**

*A Mercy* (2008) has heralded a new mode of bringing the cause of animal, nature and women all together in a novel. It is an ecofeminist novel that attracts attention towards the importance of ecofeminist movement in today's era where not only women need a voice to speak but also animals and nature. Morrison writes that, "to be given dominion over another is a hard thing; to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing." (Morrison, 2008)

It is quite obvious for Morrison to depict the sufferings whether it is women or animal because being a black woman she herself is a witness of mal-treatments, pains and sufferings. So her voice can be called the voice of a subaltern.

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