

TONI MORRISON'S BELOVED - AN ECOFEMINIST APPROACH

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*Abstract: This paper aims to explore Toni Morrison's *Beloved* through ecocritical lenses, to destabilize the cultural oppositions master - slave, white - black, man - woman, and to find an affinity of the human domination over nature with the male domination over his female counterpart. The main character of this novel, Sethe, is trying to restore her natural self-identity by reimagining and translating her former passive body into an active one, which possesses agency and the power of narration. Thus, from an object of exploitation and forgotten history, she becomes the subject of her own sexual and maternal desires, and she accomplishes to reunite the past with a promised future. Her symbolic body is felt as a home where her own actions could be taken with dignity and ownership; her body becomes ecological, meaning that the fluid discursive agency of the patriarchal and racial domination is negotiated and reconstructed within the context of the civilized white man domination over the wild nature. The oppositions related to race, gender, society and nature ought to be overcome in order to establish an ontological and epistemological equilibrium between a white patriarchal society and a culturally racialized and gendered nature, between identity and alterity.*

*Keywords: body, home, identity, ecofeminism, *Beloved**

Introduction

Written in 1987, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is a postmodernist and magical-realist novel whose plot takes place after the American Civil War, during the Reconstruction era. It focuses on the issue of slavery with a special concern on the power of love, memory or history, race, gender, class and nature. Sethe is the main protagonist, a proud black woman who has tried to escape from the social constraints in which a woman of color had to live and behave. However, her most important moral feature is the love for her children, in this sense, the protection from physical, emotional and spiritual trauma representing an existential priority. The memory of a life infused with suffering and abuses, the hovering of slavery, the intensive desire for freedom and the extreme love led Sethe to wish the death of her children. The inner cause of this

apparently act of sadism relates to an eagerness for freeing her children from the expected social enslavement and the material and psychological ordeals to come.

The act of killing is not isolated from the rest of the plot and has traumatic consequences on Sethe's psyche, her troubled mind being haunted by regrets and memories. Another affect, associated also with the relationship between the white male oppressor and the black female oppressed, consists in an identity crisis, in which the idiosyncratic and group identities are fragmented and segregated. This fragmentation occurs when the individual is culturally and socially alienated from oneself, one's life being constructed by another, alienated from a social group, one's gender or racial behavior being forcedly segregated from individuals with the same background, and alienated from nature, with which the oppressed share the same axiological status, as commodities. This societal paradigm represents the way by which the dominant, white and patriarchal society makes sure that multiple hierarchies of power are preserved in order to maintain a status quo of economic, social and even sexual exploitation.

An Ecofeminist Approach

Ecofeminism represents the main theoretical background, but not the only one, from which this scrutiny is based on, and it loosely describes movements and philosophies that link feminism with ecology (MacGregor 286). This has evolved from various fields of research, such as peace movements, women's health care, labor movements, environmental and animal liberation movements, social anarchism. Its main "premise is that the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature" (Gaard 1). Thus, there is a theoretical and pragmatic connection between the oppressor, the dominant and rational man, and the oppressed, the woman who shares the same cultural suffering with Nature; their exploitation and repression are contextualized within the environmental framework. A special material and spiritual connection between women's sensibility and nature is to be observed, this affinity representing the reason for men to act as if their female counterparts and the environment would be their objects of satisfying economic or primal needs.

From an ethical point of view, the perception of an individual about oneself is different according to gender; men have usually an idealized identity segregated from alterity which allows them to transcend the others' needs and to develop a sense of rational justice and control

over the surrounded objects or persons. Conversely, women have an immanent sense of identity, closer to alterity, which allows them to be more responsible for others and to develop a social self adapted to mutual understanding and living (2). This empathetic and social interconnectedness relates to an ethical and systematic theory wherein the generic woman is linked to all human beings, animals and living organisms, meaning that she integrates herself within the environment. By not operating with differences, women overcome the cultural oppositions of self-other, mind-body, male-female, reason-feeling, human-animal, white-black. There is the danger that, by incorporating the same patriarchal ideologies into the ecofeminist discourse, one could counter-create an essentialist duality (even though not hierarchical) between Woman and Man. As in the previous environmental theories, a balanced ecosystem represents an aim in itself. (Gaard, Murphy 3 – 4).

From a historically, culturally and philosophically point of view, the Platonic and Cartesian dichotomy of mind and body has had a pervasive influence over human civilization(s), this opposition extending its semantic context to the paradigm of man dominating the exterior nature and man dominating the weak woman. Without entering into details, from a mythical and symbolic point of view, the feminine Gaia – Earth, the divine counterpart of the masculine, Uranus, had been considered sacred and worshiped as a primordial goddess, before the Olympians and the titanic gods. As a source of beauty, contemplation, fertility and natural equilibrium, “she” represents the earthly principle of immanence, while the Uranic and heavenly god is the symbol of patriarchal transcendence over Nature. Although these ancestral cultural symbols are cosmologically married, sharing the same blood and being ontologically and teleologically situated between Chaos and Cosmos, a dominion of man over woman is to be epistemologically conceptualized. To this everlasting dualism is added a third variable – nature, in this manner, a decentering of paradigmatic androcentrism (through feminist lenses) and anthropocentrism (through ecofeminist lenses) being possible. The hierarchies and the relations of power, which have existed in the society for immemorial times, ought to be abolished.

Although ecofeminism, as a postmodern view of life, has not been coagulated into a meta-theory, several traits or challenges could be highlighted:

1. "Fundamental social transformation is necessary".
2. "Everything in nature has intrinsic value".

3. "Our anthropocentric viewpoint, instrumentalist values, and mechanistic models should be rejected for a more biocentric view that can comprehend the interconnectedness of all life processes".

4. "Humans should not attempt to "manage" or control nonhuman nature" in order " to preserve natural diversity".

5. "We must change the fact of power-based relationships and hierarchy, and move toward an ethic based on mutual respect".

6. "We must integrate the false dualisms that are based on the male/female in our perception of reality"

7. "Process is as important as goals".

8. "The personal is political. We must change the ideology that says the morality of the (female) private sphere has no application to the (male) public sphere of science, politics, and industry".

9. " We cannot change the nature of the system by playing Patriarchal games" (Gaard 20).

Owning Nature

Ecofeminism is a complex movement and its features cannot be encompassed within a synthetic enumeration because the best expression of it equals to a social or a cultural-literary dynamics. Thereby, by exemplifying, the novel *Beloved* focuses on the runaway slave Sethe who displays multiple inner and outer conflicts. "Constantly switching between past and present events allows Morrison to portray the fluidity and instability of categories and how defying definition allows for resistance and healing" (Campbell 36-37). This instability means that the ideological social structures have constructed slaves', and especially women's, identities and the only way to recover is to reunite the painful fragments of the past with the present and with the virtual future. The juxtaposition of the culturally unanimated nature with the objectified slaves by the dominant white male prohibited the urban medium to be a natural part of the environment and black people to be a constitutive part of the so-called democratic American society.

"As a result, African American environmental relationships were fragmented and nature was revealed to be deeply politicized" (37) and racialized within a schizoid game of power, nature and identity. Thus, both slaves and the environment were related to wilderness,

primitiveness and to the unknown and for this reason they have had to be tamed according to specific societal codes. Making order into this perceived chaos was a moral duty for the civilized Western male who had to exert his manhood over those savage and virgin territories, ignoring alterity and alien cultures. A barrier for transforming the cultural wilderness of the slaves into docile objects of exploitation was the natural background itself, which had to be "whitened", and also women, who were infused with a high degree of promiscuity and "non-natural" desires. Herewith, women, black people and Nature have been politically and culturally objectified and presumed dichotomies were dictated by the dominant white man, such as civilization-forest, culture-nature, man-woman, white-black.

Black women have been so socially stereotyped that the white men's guilt for numerous abuses has been perceived as ethereal and as transcending common social norms; "men are relieved of any responsibility for their sexual encounters with black women. Instead, they become the victims of wild, animal-like sexual energies emitted by their female slaves" (38-39). In this way, the male predator behaves "normally" and "naturally" when taking advantage of the weak because the latter has a constructed and internalized imputation by the former, without any societal mechanism of defense. Women of color, their lives, their identities and social roles are in the control of the white man; they represent merely an extension of the owner will. This intersectional kyriarchy, related to the power of the lord, the iconic image of the Lord, leads to domination, submission and oppression. Slaves, especially women, are considered to be inferior to their owners, even though the reality transcends these oppositions:

White people believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. Swift unnavigable waters, swinging screaming baboons, sleeping snakes, red gums ready for their sweet white blood. In a way, he thought, they were right. The more colored people spent their strength trying to convince them how gentle they were, how clever and loving, how human, the more they used themselves up to persuade whites of something Negroes believed could not be questioned, the deeper and more tangled the jungle grew inside. But it wasn't the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle white folks planted in them. And it grew. It spread. In, through and after life, it spread, until it invaded the whites who had made it. Touched them every one. Changed and altered them. Made them bloody, silly, worse than even they wanted to be, so scared were they of the jungle they had made. The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin; the red gums were their own (Morrison 113-114).

In this excerpt from the novel under scrutiny, a binary opposition between the white owner and the black owned is displayed in order to emphasize the cultural and constructed distinction. It is important to highlight that the dominant category "believed", meaning that their objective reality may be questioned and counter-demonstrated. The preposition "under" shows the fact that the negroes' identity essence is contextually negotiated by the social hierarchies of power, their identities being purely immanent to their master. Apparently, the black gist is beyond comprehension and the white's power cannot circumscribe it due to the "unnavigable waters, swinging screaming baboons"; this discursive image conveys the extreme and apophatic dichotomy self-other. Nonetheless, the supposed black "jungle", considered to be exterior to the white man, exactly as the environment, is fictionally and symbolically internalized or, on the contrary, this wilderness represents an externalized state of mind. Thus, "the red gums" have belonged to the white "baboon" from the very beginning and the oppressor has condemned what he created.

This conflicting view of nature, related to the dominant class, gender and race, has the goal to split the perceived reality in order to keep their constructed power and its mechanisms. "White culture relied on this fragmentation because it helped maintain a system that rejected black citizenship through denial of freedom, property ownership, and recognition of African history and spirituality" (Campbell 41-42). The process of fragmentation represents a perverse form of domination in which the axiological and consubstantial continuity between people or between human beings and nature is interrupted. The subject or the oppressor objectifies the former subjects (slaves, black people, women) in order to transform them into enslaved objects; this epistemic downfall equals to a process of commodification in which slaves, women and the environment are apprehended as economic goods or personal pets.

Sethe, the main character, is the perfect example for being a commodity and a sexual object at master's disposal; her memory represents a psychological tool which bridges the past and the present, the beauty of nature and also its sickness, the latter being a result of the white man's intrusion upon the natural order: "there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream, it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty" (Morrison 3). She remembers her mother who "had the bit so many times she smiled. When she wasn't smiling she smiled, and I never saw her own smile" (116). This disturbing behavior designates the state of the American black woman in the nineteenth century whose social roles and identity were the property of the dominant white man who exploited her as an object and who confiscated her

nature; as saying before, " under every dark skin was a jungle" (113) and this psychological environment was fashioned in the image of the master. Women shared (have shared) with Nature the same ordeal: to be exploited for patriarchal advantages.

Having been considered commodities and exploited for economic reasons made slaves to be socially constructed as sub-human, having (sub)animal features: "something else and that something was less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub." (43). They sometimes experienced a lesser degree of freedom and dignity than animals; in this sense, the oppressor may be considered having a pre-capitalist behavior and being mindless of the long-term productivity of the black people. When Sethe tries to understand that "a characteristic is a feature. A thing that's natural to a thing" (109) and she is instructed to " put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don't forget to line them up" (111), we notice the fact that her womanhood and blackness are emphasized and "othered" in order to draw an artificial "line" between the self, who creates hierarchies of power, and the other, who (which) is objectified and reduced to an animal. Furthermore, this cultural confinement is apprehended as being "natural" for the oppressed, seen as a "thing"; in other words, black people are not socially constructed as real persons and the objective reality, in this case nature, is culturally confiscated and reshaped according to the oppressor's wish and needs.

"American culture has employed the concepts of natural and unnatural to reinforce ideological boundaries between the human and the less-than-human" (Campbell 47). Most of all, women of color suffered twofold: because they were not white and because they were not men. Sethe remembers that the white men " held me down and took it. Milk that belonged to my baby..... they handled me like I was the cow, no, the goat, back behind the stable because it was too nasty to stay in with the horses" (Morrison 114). Sethe, as the archetype of the oppressed woman, is situated at the bottom of the chain of power and has to endure whatever the white man considers to be appropriate. He decides everything and Nature is epistemologically constructed by the male observer due to the fact that the environment functions as a medium "enviroming" the rational mind. Thus, what is natural is, in fact, an ideological product of the patriarchal society; if holding and controlling nature is "natural", the grotesque act of taking away something intimate to a woman represents a justified thing to do. Stealing milk equals to a barbaric act of showing that women have no privacy, no personal lives, no maternal autonomy, no control over their future or over their own identities; they represent a natural property.

Reclaiming the Feminine Oikos

As seen above, women of color were considered natural property, meaning that the environment was racialized and gendered, and women were culturally naturalized as belonging to their master. There is a narrative and symbolical resemblance between the black woman and Nature, both of them having been massively exploited and treated as commodities. These two categories are strongly related through the agency of tree images; these plants have been worshipped and considered to be holy for millennia: "a green tree usually stands for eternal life, immortality and undead spirits, whereas a leaf-shedding tree represents new life, rebirth and resurrection" (Tjerngren 5). They mediate between the masculine Uranus and the feminine Gaia, cosmological opposites, but, at the same time, complementary. From a mythical, dendrological and pomological point of view, the Tree of Life represents a theological and biological metaphor for the world, making the connection between the sacred sky, the earth and the underworld. From a biblical perspective, which has Mesopotamian roots, it is the counterpart of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

The latter tree is mentioned in various religious traditions as the reason for Adam and Eve to be corrupted by the malefic serpent and to commit the original sin. Conversely, from another perspective, the serpent may represent the hybrid creature, between water and earth, which (who) conveys the Promethean or Luciferic knowledge of good and evil, bringing them from potentiality into reality. Lucifer might be considered to be the seraphim who emancipated mankind from the tyranny of a patriarchal God and who brought into light the human free will. As a consequence, God punishes and banishes them from the Garden of Eden, meaning that the divine patriarch establishes a transcendent opposition between Humanity and Nature. Concerning the ecofeminist approach, it is worth to mention the fact that Adam, as an iconic image of God the Father, introduces a pattern of hierarchy from the very beginning by naming his feminine counterpart; in ancient religions, the name was essentially linked to one's identity: "Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man (Genesis 2: 23).

After the forbidden fruit being consumed, Adam does not behave as if he loves his wife and he further creates oppositions by blaming Eve: "The woman whom thou gavest to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I did eat" (3: 12). Doing so, the man externalized his guilt and, through the collective condition of the original sin, he institutionalizes the primal guilt and

passes it over the woman. Moreover, the post-Edenic social structure has capitalist features because, from a social ecological point of view, a hierarchy of power between society and nature is established: the land is cursed, it must be cultivated by Man and the human beings are coated with animal skins, a powerful symbol for cultural exploitation of animals and natural resources. In this context, even though Eve is "the mother of all living" (3: 20), she is severely punished by the same patriarchal authority, along with all natural elements : "I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee" (3: 16). This anathema links women's suffering to Gaia, the feminine and divine spirit of Nature, and shows that Man has a divine, yet undeserved, right over Woman.

The Tree of Life, from which Adam and Eve did not taste, could give them eternal life. It transcends the binary opposition of good and evil and represents both life and death, within a continuous cycle of transgression and reborn. When Sethe says: " if I hadn't killed her she would have died" (Morrison 114), she actually conveys the meaning of a worthless life without freedom and, thus, the sin of killing is associated with freedom, alike the mythical story of the original sin when the primordial couple exerted their free will and lost immortality. Continuing the analysis upon the main protagonist's trauma, we may infer that "trees function as a screen" (Tjerngren 6), allowing one's to suppress painful memories: "Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world. It shamed her--remembering the wonderful soughing trees rather than the boys" (Morrison 3). Another psychological replacement occurs when remembering Sweet Home, where trees are more important than the "house of horror". On the other hand, trees are linked to men's fate, maybe because there is a symbolical need to protect the female counterparts: Sixo is burned next to a tree, Paul A hanged from a tree as probably Halle; nevertheless, they do not represent evil because the cruel acts belong to the white men, not to Nature itself.

Another dendrological image relates to creating cultural oppositions when the schoolteacher, the male authority, writes slaves' characteristics, using an ink made from trees and manufactured by Sethe; "He liked the ink I made" (22); the differences are superficial because the discourse of alterity and power is written with the same natural substance with the help of which a resemblance between nature, woman, man, white and black is underlined. By writing, the authoritative power of the white male embodies into a visual tool of exerting hierarchy, contrary to the weak agency of women of color who did not know how to write

(Tjerner 9). After escaping, Sethe sees the white girl Amy Denver "come out the trees" (Morrison 105); although she possesses the power of whiteness, Amy does not have the authority of a high-class man and, thus, shares with the black woman the lack of social power, being both "lawless outlaws" (50). When rescuing Sethe, her breath is "like burning wood" (46), a symbol for life, power and soul, in the ancient Greek psyche representing the force which animates bodies.

Passing to the narrative present, nature represents a place of psychological solace and refuge from the built environment; Denver, Sethe's daughter, named after the white girl, seeks spiritual or sexual privacy in the middle of the boxwood bushes: " Veiled and protected by the live green walls, she felt ripe and clear, and salvation was as easy as a wish". Here, she felt " as a person rather than a structure" (17); the opposition between her, as a woman with free will and many desires, and social structures, infused with patriarchal hierarchies of power, is mediated by the oppressed nature, which represents a place of inner connections. Baby Suggs also uses nature to appropriate black people to the environment; the Clearing, this special place within the forest with free individuals instead of trees, represents a place of acceptance and communitarian healing, where the body feels as being home.

Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. You got to love it, you! And no, they ain't in love with your mouth. Yonder, out there, they will see it broken and break it again. What you say out of it they will not heed. What you scream from it they do not hear. What you put into it to nourish your body they will snatch away and give you leavins instead. No, they don't love your mouth. You got to love it. This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved (52).

Accepting is the only way by which the past embraces the future through a present process of healing. " The body is important here because it is as a site of pleasure and narrative that community sustains the black female body..... pleasure and narrative function in the development of awareness of one's embodied self and the body's relation to the notion of home" (Audi 46-47). The tree from Sethe's back represents the scar inscribed by the authority of the white man who entered powerfully the virgin landscape of the Black Woman. Being a

victim of social and sexual abuses, the main character of the novel has let the dominion of men to rule over her natural self and let her individuality to be constructed by the masculine authority. Realizing that the past should not be forgotten, but integrated into the present, she accepts the slavery and gender sufferings and sublimates them in order to transcend the structural "tree" and to transform it into a home inscribed with her own "ink" of ethnic, gender, maternal and sexual love. The fragmented past and memories are gathered into a holistic self who tastes both evil and good of life.

Conclusions

Etymologically and linguistically speaking, to reclaim something means to obtain a thing which once belonged to the original owner, in this case, the American African woman. She had lost it or it had been confiscated by someone. Thus, her stolen energies are essentially hers and the societal hierarchy has been continuously carrying away her power of decision . Moreover, to reclaim also means to bring uncultivated areas or wasteland into a condition of cultivation. The cultural perception about women is that they are the opposites of the rational men who have the noble duty to cultivate and to tame the women's sensibility. On the other hand, oikos (from the Greek οἶκος) represents the same root for ecology and economics, opposite domains of cultural research, and means house or family. Ecology relates to nature, culturally perceived as an alien medium which environs the built or urban medium. Conversely, economy relates especially to capitalist societies in which the means of production and human needs are far more important than preserving the natural landscape.

Therefore, these two terms are irreconcilable from a cultural point of view; nevertheless they can be married from a postmodern and poststructuralist perspective by deconstructing this binary opposition. As inferred before the human social-economic medium and the non-human natural one are consubstantial in terms of their mythical, historical and social development, the former being a natural extension of the latter. Continuing the previous ideas, reclaiming the feminine oikos means for women to take back what was theirs from the dominant men and to regain a sense of home and community within the larger ecosystem of nature, society and structures of power. Nature is not anymore a neutral environment, which "environs" the human minds and society, but an oikos, a home where an ontological continuity between human beings and nature is to be observed. Women have become ecological by being a part of nature, not by segregating the human existence from its natural counterpart.

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