

## TONI MORRISON'S *TAR BABY*: A STUDY IN ECOCRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

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### **Abstract:**

*Ecocriticism usually points to the study of man in relation to nature, landscape and environment in a literary discourse. What is strikingly important in ecocriticism is the interconnectedness between human world and nonhuman world consisting of nature, landscape and environment. Ecocritics, Ecologists and Environmentalists tenaciously tend to restore the sound ecosystem on the earth following the two devastating World Wars, global warming, massive deforestation, desertification and all types of pollution. In the African American fiction, novelists like Toni Morrison endeavour to highlight ecocentric approach rather than anthropomorphic stance by combining ecology/environment with topography, geography, patriarchy, colonial hegemony, racism and cultural consciousness. The present paper is an attempt to study Morrison's novel *Tar Baby* from an ecocritical perspective by highlighting the struggle between nature and civilization with emphasis on the destruction of the ecosystem of the island called *Isles des Chavaliers*. As a matter of fact, *Tar Baby* is a powerful plea for restoration of a balanced ecosystem which is foregrounded upon the amicable relationship between biotic and abiotic elements.*

**Key Words:** *Ecocriticism, Ecosystem, Exploitation, Displacement, Dominance, Environmental Consciousness.*

Ecocriticism has become a subject of engaging interest since the second half of the twentieth century. Ecologists, Environmentalists and Ecocritics have all intensely felt and seriously realized the fact that following the two World Wars time has come to protect earth and the world of nature, landscape and environment from deforestation and desertification and various forms of environmental pollution and global warming. Ecocriticism is usually defined as application of ecological concepts to the literary representation of man in relation to nature, landscape and environment. It entails a holistic approach to highlight the significance of a sound ecosystem which is based on the amicable interaction of man and the biotic and abiotic elements. In ecocriticism, the onus lies in the inviolable bond between the human and the nonhuman worlds vindicating the fact that one cannot live without the other. In twentieth century ecocritical discourse, the viewpoints of William Rueckert and Cheryll Glotfelty and Lawrence Buell have been found meaningful for adulating/enriching ecocentric consciousness and holistic approach as against men's anthropocentric arrogance in the twentieth century. Whereas, Rueckert ("Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism," 1978) emphasizes "the application of ecological concepts to the study of literature(107), Glotfelty (*The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, 1996) stresses the relationship between "literature and the physical environment," thereby forwarding an earth centric approach to the study of literature. Buell, on the other hand (*The Future of Environmental Criticism*, 2005) recommends four important criteria for evaluating a text in the light of environmental consciousness the amicable and integrated relationship between the human and the nonhuman world, rejection of dominance of human world over the nonhuman world, accountability of the human world to the nonhuman world and lastly, emphasis on environment as a process rather than a static construct (7-8).

Toni Morrison has been unanimously acclaimed as a powerful figure in the arena of African American fiction in 21<sup>st</sup> century whose deep insights into the complexity, anxiety and angst of the black

community is intertwined to environmental consciousness, environmental racism and the questions of race, identity, home, memory and black culture. In her fictional narratives like *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1987), *Paradise* (1998), *A Mercy* (2008), *Home* (2012) and her latest novel *God Help the Child* (2015), Morrison has problematised the aforesaid issues as the representative of the black community which is defined by racism, topography, psychology and black cultural heritage. The issues of exploitation, race, displacement, colonial hegemony, resistance and search for identity have been brilliantly thematised in her novels. At the same time, Morrison's novels also highlight a distinctly African American environmental ethic which pays close attention to the social forces that construct our relationship to the environment and insist upon the inextricability of the social from the natural.

Morrison's belief in the interconnectedness of man, nature, religion, culture, earth and her strong environmental consciousness are important features that qualify her as one of the important writers of environmental fiction. The interdisciplinary nature of ecocriticism is another important characteristic which opens up innumerable strands and possibilities for an ecocritical study. The relationship between the African American history and nature, spirituality in nature, feminist ecocritical approaches and the psychological impact of land and place are some significant themes that fall within Morrison's ecocritical analysis. Morrison's fiction has not only shaped the landscape of modern American fiction but it has also left a profound impact in shaping the African American literature, life and aesthetics. An ecocritical reading of Morrison's work demonstrates her belief in the interconnectedness of nature, religion and the African American identity.

In *Tar Baby*, Morrison portrays the struggle between nature and civilization where we see a threat to nature's survival right from the beginning: "the men had already folded the earth where there had been no fold and hollowed here where there had been no hollow" (9). This explains what had happened to the river, "it crested, then lost its course, and finally its head. Evicted from the place it had lived, and forced into unknown turf, it could not form its pools or waterfalls, and ran every which way" (9). The change in the river's course threatens and affects all the other lives in the ecological system such as, the labourers imported from Haiti, wild parrots, fishes and even the clouds floating across the blue sky. We are told that only the "champion daisy trees" were found serene, precisely because they were part of the forest which was two thousand years old. The change in the river and for that matter in the world is detailed by Morrison in the following words: "After all, they were part of a rain forest already two thousand years old and scheduled for eternity, so they ignored the men and continued to rock the diamondbacks that slept in their arms. It took the rivers to persuade them that indeed the world was altered. That never again would rain be equal, and by the time they realized it and had run their roots deeper, clutching the earth like lost boys found it was too late" (9).

The ecocritical perspective of the novel is presented through Son Green who is an ally to the natural world. As his very surname suggests, Son Green greens the environment of L'Arbe de la Croix, bringing an understanding of the natural into the Streets' world of artifice. Morrison begins *Tar Baby* with the voice of the island, narrating its beauty, inhabitants and ruin. The magnificent winter houses which were constructed on Isles des Chavaliers is a strong signal towards the alteration and destruction of the island's ecosystem. The felling of the two hundred years old daisy trees which were part of the rain forest reads as murder as they were scheduled for eternity: "they were wild-eyed and yelling sinking their roots deeper into the ground as the men gnawed through them" (10). The indigenous bodies feel the pain of the felling trees as it reminded them of their own displacement despite their deep roots in the Carribean.

Set in the Carribean, *Tar Baby* is believed to be Morrison's first imaginative narrative set outside of the United States where white characters significantly occupy centre stage and play an important role not only as a cultural background against which the black community is set, but also as actual personas of the novel. Hence, *Tar Baby* is also full of wealth, money and high society and luxury which is different from

Morrison's usual social settings of working and middle class where the wealthy white society is always present in the background, creating a space where the black characters struggle. However, in *Tar Baby* two thirds of the action is set in and around L'Arbe de la Croix, a property built and owned by Valerian Street, the white boss who planned it to be a summer house and his residence after retirement. From the first chapter of the novel itself, we see scenes of environmental destruction from the viewpoint of the island's natural residents: clouds, fish, parrots, thousand-year-old daisy trees, and even a river which are destroyed, evicted or altered by the construction of "a collection of magnificent winter houses on Isles des Chaviers" (9). Kathleen R. Wallace and Karla Armbruster are of the opinion that "Morrison returns to this nonhuman perspective repeatedly throughout the novel, emphasizing that although nature is profoundly affected by human activities, it also has a life of its own and that Morrison, in drawing our attention to the plight of wilderness reminds us that wild nature, although vulnerable to our actions, has its own independent being. Morrison displays a consciousness quite compatible with the values and concerns of the American nature writing tradition and mainstream environmental movement" (212). The destruction of the daisy trees and the devastation of the river is an illustration of how each element of the ecosystem is interconnected and Morrison reinforces this connection by humanizing the natural world.

Valerian's power, indifference and greed consumes the island's natural resources and its inhabitants. Morrison seeks our attention to the colonization of people, land, and natural resources by setting her novel in the Carribean, a tropical but by no means a pristine landscape. The natural world is powerless and the inhabitants are deprived of their role as custodians of their natural environment which leaves a deep psychological unrest on their minds and this eventually impacts their outlook towards life on earth. Man's impulsive greed and preoccupation with wealth destroys the environment and its green which endangers both the human as well as the nonhuman health. Through this novel Morrison presents the terrifying fact of how irresponsible urbanization and the modern man's pride unwittingly degrades the environment. Valerian ignores the island's beautiful vegetation but prefers his greenhouse which is filled with transplanted North American flora and European classical music. This indicates human being's desire to control nature. Valerian even threatens Son because he literally shakes up the former's greenhouse, as a result of which the cyclamens refuse to bloom: "if they die I'll have Sydney chase you back into the sea" (148). Valerian's language suggest colonial dominance when he treats Son, a Black man, as a commodity less valuable than his greenhouse flora. Son's entry into the Street's home and stealth in Valerian's greenhouse is symbolic of the island's natural elements which stands opposed to Valerian's illusion of control over this tropical paradise. The island resist Valerian's colonization in myriad ways and fight against the artifice of the seasonal homes at every turn. Morrison, with the eyes of a keen observer even captures even the tiniest element in the island like the ants to foreground nature as resisting hegemonic human control which according to Valerian are uncontrollable and omnipresent. Valerian further shows his dislike for the island's ecosystem by shipping mongooses to the island to get rid of snakes and rats.

Valerian Street's arrogant white supremacy over the natural environment as well as the lesser privileged people can be seen when he fires his Caribbean servants Gideon and Therese for stealing apples. Son is enraged that Street "had been able to dismiss with a flutter of the fingers the people whose sugar and cocoa had allowed him to grow in old regal comfort" (202) and Son continues his rant against the unsatiated greed and wastefulness of the white culture by stating that, "they had not the dignity of wild animals who did not eat where they defecated but they could defecate over a whole people and come here to live and defecate some more by tearing up the land and that is why they loved property so, because they had killed it, soiled it, defecated on it and they loved more than anything the places where they shit" (203). By invoking the dignity of the wild animals, Son reflects Morrison's recognition of "a natural world in some ways separate from human culture and possessing its own logic, a world he contrasts with the physically and spiritually destructive behaviors of dominant western culture that defy order and logic. However, Son steps beyond such a standard environmentalist critique of human drive to dominate nature when he links

the destruction of Isles de Chevaliers to the ideology that sanctions the oppression of the marginalized people who call it home. Son's insight suggest that Morrison's treatment of nature not only moves beyond mainstream nature writing and environmentalism but also focuses on “the different and often conflicting interpretations of nature espoused by various human communities and suggest how the dominant groups use these interpretations to control and subjugate both human and nonhuman others” (*Beyond Nature*, 212-213). Despite Valerian's colonization of the island the soldier ants prevail and Son's bits of chocolate left on the ground attract them to the property (104), once again suggesting Son's connection with the island's creatures. The tiny industrious creatures begin their fight against Valerian's colonization of the island: “the sidewalk bricks begin popping out of the ground, leaning every which way. Urged, it seemed to him, out of earth, like they were poked from beneath and ate the wires of the entire system to the greenhouse” (284) which hints that the island's ecosystem reasserts the interrelatedness of a biotic community.

Morrison's novel echoes Donna J. Haraway's argument that “the perspectives of the subjugated should not be exempt from critical reexamination” (584) and by representing the subjugated standpoint of African Americans, Morrison, in her novels notably explore how the natural world has been used as an instrument of oppression but at the same time has provided sustenance and comfort as suggested by Armbruster and Wallace, “she both challenges and ultimately enriches mainstream American environmental discourse, including the ecocritical discourse” (213). Hence, *Tar Baby* remains a complex novel, worthy of ecocritical study with multiple layers which has been proved by Morrison's significant commentary on the colonial elements of exploitation which targets the environment and the various oppressed groups of people.

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