



The Natural Ecological Construction in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*

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Abstract

Morrison constructs in her novels a vivid ecological world where the natural landscape and the African American community's relationship with it play crucial roles. In *Song of Solomon*, the rural landscapes are not just backdrops but are intertwined with the characters' identities and their quests for self-discovery and cultural roots. In *Beloved*, nature also serves as a potential source of solace and resistance. By applying the eco-criticism approach to *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, this study aims to unfold how Morrison uses ecological elements to enhance our understanding of the African American experience, the historical and social injustices they faced, and the complex interplay between human beings, nature, and culture. It further emphasizes the significance of these novels in highlighting the importance of ecological harmony and the need to heal the bonds between humans and their environments, which have been severed both physically and psychologically, in the context of a troubled historical legacy.

Keywords

Toni Morrison; *Song of Solomon*; *Beloved*; eco-criticism

1. Introduction

In Toni Morrison's novels, the black characters' understanding of nature is influenced by African traditional religions, and their relationship with nature is very close. *Song of Solomon* won the Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the National Book Critics Circle Award. Since its publication, scholars using various approaches, including mythological archetypes, feminism, and narratology, have studied the characters, themes, and expression techniques in the novel, fully demonstrating its high artistic value and literary value. The same is true of Toni Morrison's other novel *Beloved*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and was named the No. 1 Best American Novel of the Last 25 Years by *The New York Times*. Some scholars have noticed the absence of black writers in eco-criticism discussions, and that there is a lack of research on American neo-realism literature from the perspective of ecocriticism (Yang, 2024). Other Chinese scholars appeal to constructing the Chinese school of ecological criticism, including enhancing the theoretical construction as well as practical dimension (Wang, 2022; Wang, 2023). Through close reading, it can be found that Toni Morrison's novels not only reflect eco-feminist consciousness but also show the indispensable role and status of nature and national culture in the growth of American black characters.

2. Seeking Cultural Roots in *Song of Solomon*

Solomon's song paints a grand panorama of African American epic for readers, tracing the history of white slave traders who physically and mentally oppressed and enslaved black people (Hu, 2005). In this novel filled with complex conflicts, issues of race, class, and gender are connected by a hidden thread—the relationship between humans and nature. The

fundamental argument of eco-feminism is that the ideology that legitimizes gender oppression also legitimizes the oppression of nature (Jin, 2004). In *Solomon's Song*, nature and women are both subjugated and oppressed by patriarchal society.

The colonizers transported slaves from Africa to the Americas, not only physically separating them from their ancestral homeland, but also subjecting them to physical enslavement and psychological oppression, and implanting white mainstream culture in their minds. Toni Morrison's novels, in particular, recapture the "double consciousness" of African Americans (Bell, 2004, p. 10). In *Song of Solomon*, there is a clear difference in how black and white cultures view nature: the former sees nature as an integral part of the universe that is inseparable from black people's survival, while the latter views nature as a commodity. Under slavery, both slaves and land were considered property of the slave owners. The establishment of the slave owners' dominance relied not only on the possession of material goods but also on white supremacist ideology and male-dominated patriarchal ideology. The two opposing values of blacks and whites are first manifested in the life of Milkman's father, Macon. He used to work on their farm with his father, not only naming their livestock after people but also endowing them with personality (Morrison, 2005). He felt uneasy when he accidentally killed a doe. However, after his father was killed by whites and their farm was taken over, a shadow was cast over his soul. In order to protect himself, he internalized white cultural values and made them his life principles, by acquiring property and exploiting poor black people as much as possible to accumulate wealth, he rose to the ranks of the black middle class. His wife and daughter were also treated as part of his property and were taken out for a Sunday drive to show off his wealth every week. He sent his daughter to college only so that she could find a suitable husband. In contrast, his son was not able to go to college because business sense was more important. With the commercialization of human society, nature was also incorporated into the process of commercialization. In the context of this background, the island of Glory was born. It was not only a place of consumption for the middle class, but also a symbol of their social status and identity. Furthermore, the novel also attacks implicitly the behavior of people who are driven by economic interests and overuse of land, which leads to the destruction of ecological balance.

In the novel, both women and nature are regarded as the "other" and as the objects to be dominated. Facing the oppression of racial class and gender discrimination, the female characters in the novel have carried out a certain degree of resistance. Ruth was cut off from the outside world by her father and then her husband successively, and lived an ascetic life for many years after getting married. The appearance of Pilate brought a turning point in her life. After living an ascetic life for many years, she successfully gave birth to Milkman and regarded him as the fruit of her victory. Due to Macon's serious sense of hierarchy, he once again severed his daughter's connection with the outside world. The education his daughters received was focused on cultivating them into good wives and loving mothers, like the "angels in the house". However, one of his daughters, Corinthians, secretly found herself a job that seemed rather humble in her father's eyes and, contrary to her father's orders, got together with a poor black man. Another female in the novel, Hagar, after being abandoned by Milkman, would try to kill him every month as if performing a ritual to draw his attention.

Pilate is the female who has the closest relationship with nature in the novel. She struggled out by herself after her mother died. After her umbilical cord was cut, the remaining stump shrank, so she didn't have a navel. She, like the daughter of the earth, had a taste of the woods in her mouth since childhood because she liked chewing pine needles (Morrison, 2005). She was also a herbalist and, like nature, had the functions of healing and comforting. It was because Macon drank the herbal medicine that Pilate gave to Ruth that Ruth became pregnant with Milkman. The physiological particularity of Pilate also endowed her with the function of self-defense, protecting her from the persecution of racists. Finally, unfortunately, she was accidentally killed by Guitar, and after death, she turned into a little bird and flew into the sky. Such strange imagination, as well as Pilate's ability to see her father's ghost, are all related to the traditional African religious beliefs, and the protagonists in the novel firmly believe in them. When Morrison was asked in an interview whether she believed in the existence of ghosts, she gave a definite answer (Lei, 2000). This is undoubtedly a powerful rebuttal by the black ethnic tradition to the established order of modern civilization.

In *Song of Solomon*, black people's understanding of the organic connection between human beings and nature is different from the Western world view, which is inseparable from the traditional ethnic culture of black people. However, under the cultural values of white people, black women and nature can only be the objects of exploitation. This kind of consciousness has also permeated into the minds of black men, subjecting black women and nature to double oppression.

Song of Solomon is the only novel by Morrison that features a male protagonist. Regarding the reason for choosing a male as the main character, she said in an interview that in some areas men have more to learn than women (Taylor-Guthrie, 1994). Mary J. Demarr and Jane S. Bakerman classified *Song of Solomon* as a bildungsroman in their works. Wang Shouren and Wu Xinyun (2004) also referred to this novel as a bildungsroman in their monograph and believed that as a female writer, Morrison opened up a new perspective and injected new connotations into the male individual bildungsroman in black literature. In Morrison's view, the sign that a black man has truly grown up is that he understands

his own culture and the women of his race (Wang & Wu, 2004). *Song of Solomon* unfolds around the growth experience of Milkman, a young black man. Just like most bildungsromans, the protagonist of the novel also experiences a typical growth process of being tempted, setting out on a journey of exploration, having adventures, finding himself and gaining insights into life (Rui, 2004). And what makes *Song of Solomon* different from ordinary bildungsromans is that it associates personal growth with the identification of ethnic culture.

An accidental journey in search of gold changed Milkman's life. What this journey brought him was not the gold he had expected, but an unexpected gain—his family history. This family history dated back far enough for him to trace his ancestors in Africa. Especially when he learned that his ancestors were able to fly, he felt proud and happy to have such ancestors, because the identification with African ancestors enabled one to step out of his ordinary, self-centered daily life. His individual life could be depersonalized and sublimated (Segy, 1976). The exploration and discovery of family history and his real name not only endowed Milkman with a new meaning in life but also promoted his understanding of his own ethnic culture.

In the growth process of the protagonist, the role that nature plays in purifying the soul and cultivating sentiment is rather common in literary works. However, the unique charm of *Song of Solomon* lies in its organic combination of personal growth, nature, and ethnic culture. Milkman's participation in hunting enabled him, who had already been tainted by the bad habits of modern life, to receive the “re-baptism” of the ancient civilization in nature (Hu, 2005). Everything that symbolizes modern civilization was useless in the forest, for he could only rely on his innate body and enduring virtues. This hunting experience allowed Milkman to get close to nature, listen to the voice of nature and deepen his understanding of ethnic culture, and reshape his outlook on the world and life. He discovered that people, animals, plants, and the earth could all communicate with one another.

Milkman's perception of the relationship between human beings and nature reflects the traditional African religious views. Generally speaking, traditional African religions hold that there are a series of “mediators” between God and human beings, including human souls, animals, and plants. (Twesigye, 1996). Human survival is closely related to maintaining a harmonious and coordinated lifestyle of the whole universe. When Milkman walked on the earth, he felt that his body merged with the earth, and he did not limp (Morrison, 2005). Milkman's coming to the land where his ancestors once lived and having close contact with the earth this time enabled him to obtain spiritual wealth, thus making up for his physical defects. Later, Milkman developed a love and a sense of responsibility for his family and friends by tracing the lyrics of folk songs. Finally, after experiencing the trials of growth, he leaped lightly into the air like the North Star, threw himself into the embrace of nature, and achieved a spiritual take-off.

Song of Solomon is different from ordinary ecological novels and bildungsromans. The awareness of ecofeminism and the pattern of bildungsroman are both reflected in this work. The novel also has its unique and innovative aspects in the growth pattern, which is manifested in its combination of the protagonist's growth with the understanding of nature and the identification with ethnic culture, thus achieving a perfect unity of ecological novels and bildungsromans.

Under the influence of his father's education, the protagonist Milkman was a selfish money-worshiper at first. Although he had ancestors who could fly, just like the white peacock in the novel, because of its love for “vanity”, its heavy tail made it unable to fly. He was more like Atalanta, the goddess of the hunt in Greek mythology, who was forced to give up her maiden freedom because of being lured by the golden apple. When Milkman abandoned his obsession with money and began to form an identification with his own ethnic culture and simultaneously deepened his understanding of nature and women, he, like Atalanta, was able to fly above the golden apples and go to worship in the temple of truth, freedom, and human love.

3. Finding Tree Companions in *Beloved*

In the African “chain of being”, plants are regarded to be one type of intermediary, through which God intervenes in daily life and human history in order to offer and mediate his grace, power, mercy, and protection from evil, misfortunes, and untimely death (Twesigye, 1996). Michele Bonnet also notes the significant role of trees in the African religion and *Beloved*. Acting as the intermediary between God and man in *Beloved*, trees recur throughout the novel, such as the trees in Sweet Home, the blossoming trees along the north, Denver's bower, and the trees in the Clearing.

The tree in Sweet Home for Sixo is the source of vital force that can infuse into his body and keep him alive. Sixo's close relationship with trees appears to be innate, as his skin color is indigo, which is also the name of a kind of plant in the pea family. He “went among trees at night. For dancing, he said, to keep his bloodlines open” (Morrison, 2002, p. 25). As proof of the magic power of the tree, his “Thirty-Mile Woman” finally got his child, who was referred to as his “blossoming seed” (Morrison, 2002, p. 229).

When Paul D was in Sweet Home, he considered trees to be his sacred brother: “Trees were inviting; things you could

trust and be near; talk to if you wanted to as he frequently did since way back when he took the midday meal in the fields of Sweet Home” (Morrison, 2002, p. 21). Sometimes Paul D sat alone under it, but more often with Sixo. The tree appeared to be a loyal friend or even a brother of Paul D and Sixo, with his shade providing shelter, comfort, and refreshing energy for them. After Paul D worked for a long time in the field, Brother was the one whom Paul D could turn to for casting away fatigue and getting refreshed. The Africans believed that trees were intermediaries between God and man. Hence Paul D trusted Brother and wanted to talk to him, letting his voice be heard by God through the tree. Brother was also the place where Paul D and other slaves in Sweet Home chose to take the midday meal. Since trees were considered to be holy as intermediaries between God and man, the meal taken under the tree also became a sacred gathering before God.

The blossoming trees for Paul D were his “traveling company” that could light the road to freedom. When Paul D asked the Cherokee how he might get to “Free North”, the Cherokee told him: “Only the tree flowers. As they go, you go. You will be where you want to be when they are gone” (Morrison, 2002, p. 112). “So he raced from dogwood to blossoming peach. When they thinned out he headed for the cherry blossoms, then magnolia, chinaberry, pecan, walnut, and prickly pear” (Morrison, 2002, p. 112). These blossoms were spring flowers which were a symbol of life and freedom. Therefore, Paul D had to keep running to treat it as his traveling company. Paul D, a dark ragged figure finally gained his freedom with the guidance of the blossoming plums.

Like Paul D and Sixo’s Brother, Denver’s bower was like her parent providing shelter and comfort for her, which she could develop fully. The place was “closed off from the hurt of the hurt world”: concealed by “post oaks, five boxwood bushes, planted in a ring, had started stretching toward each other four feet off the ground to form a round, empty room seven feet high, its walls fifty inches of murmuring leaves” (Morrison, 2002, p. 28). In order to enter this room, Denver needed to bend low. As trees are esteemed to be sacred, the action of bending suggests one way of worshiping. The murmuring leaves indicate the human nature of the boxwood. Actually, the bower accompanied Denver as she grew up. In the beginning, the bower was where she played. However, “First a playroom (where the silence was softer), then a refuge (from her brothers’ fright), soon the place became the point” (Morrison, 2002, p. 28). In addition, this room was “life-giving” (Bonnet, 1997) and supplied Denver with spiritual food: in the bower “Denver’s imagination produced its own hunger and its own food, which she badly needed because loneliness wore her out” (Morrison, 2002, pp. 28-29). This bower was also the place where Denver developed her sense of independence and maturity. Veiled and protected by the live green walls of trees, she felt ripe and clear. Standing in the “live” “emerald light” of the trees, Denver recovered her strength to face the world again.

The holiness of trees was best reflected in the Clearing—“a wide-open place cut deep in the woods nobody knew for what at the end of a path known only to deer and whoever cleared the land in the first place” (Morrison, 2002, p. 87). Like Denver’s bower, the Clearing was quiet, private, and completely secret, an indication of its holiness. It was the place where Baby Suggs, holy, prayed, and “called and the hearing heard” (Morrison, 2002, p. 177). Years after the death of Baby Suggs, the Clearing for Sethe was “still the green blessed place: misty with plant steam and the decay of berries” (Morrison, 2002, p. 89). As Sixo had the same color as the plant indigo, Baby Suggs, holy, seemed to have been endowed with an intrinsic nature of a tree since she smelled like bark in the day and leaves at night”. Due to the holiness of the place and the intimate relationship between Baby Suggs and trees, the Clearing was where Sethe determined to find the spirit of Baby Suggs and to pay tribute to Halle”.

Being holy, quiet, and secret, the Clearing was the place where the black people could imagine grace and love themselves. Baby Suggs told them in the Clearing that “the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine” (Morrison, 2002, p. 88). She asked them to love their flesh and especially their heart, as the heart is the prize. After saying the Word, Baby Suggs would dance “the rest of what her heart had today” while the others gave music for her. “Long notes held until the four-part harmony was perfect enough for their deeply loved flesh” (Morrison, 2002, p. 89). The whole process taken in the Clearing was some “fixing ceremony” for them as it was for Sethe because it could heal the wound that the black people had gotten yonder. This healing function developed to the extreme when an assembly of neighborhood women came to Sethe’s house to save her from Beloved and her memory of her past slavery life. The heat and the sound had evoked Sethe’s memory of the Clearing, the smell of leaves simmering in the sun, and the long notes. For Sethe, it was in the Clearing that baptism could take place.

The Clearing was also the place where black people interacted with trees fully. During the call-and-response, the black people mingled with trees. While Baby Suggs was praying, the black people watched her from the trees. The black people stayed with trees as their company all the time while Baby Suggs was praying. When Baby Suggs called, not only the black people responded to her powerful call, but also the trees “rang” and “groundlife shuddered” (Morrison, 2002, p. 87). The trees were actually the participants of the activity. After the black people laughed, danced, and cried, they finally got “exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath” (Morrison, 2002,

p. 88). It seemed that they were going through trials to achieve spiritual rebirth. The Clearing then provided support and rejuvenating power for such a process.

4. Conclusion

In *Song of Solomon*, by digging through the characters' interactions with the natural environment, the novel reveals how the disruption of ecological harmony mirrors the fragmentation and displacement experienced by the African American community. Similarly, trees appear constantly throughout *Beloved*. The significance of the trees is reflected in its role as the intermediary through which God offers his grace, power, and comfort to the black people. In addition, the black people treat trees not simply as plants but as their loyal brothers and interact with them in various activities. Only by restoring the disrupted ecological and emotional balance can the characters face the past trauma and heal the wounds that affect the characters' ability to establish a healthy relationship with their surroundings.

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