



RESEARCH PAPER

Environment and Women in Erdrich's Tracks and Morrison's Paradise: A Comparative Ecofeminist Study

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ABSTRACT

This study, in tune with Cheryll Glotfelty's methodological propositions of ecocriticism and black feminist Patricia H. Collins' contribution to 'écriture feminine', studies the formation of the female subject in Erdrich's *Tracks* and Morrison's *Paradise*. With the delimitation of the Native American and Afro American women's writing, this study analyzes how these female writers from the marginalized communities have produced 'ecofeminism' placing the sexuality of their women and their relation with nature at the center of subjectivity. While the Euro American accounts of the history, culture and origin of the indigenous and Afro American subjects had projected stereotypical, negative images of the non-White people, Louise Erdrich and Toni Morrison, through the employment of eco-feminist narrative techniques, have reconstructed the history, beliefs, rituals, traditions, myths and cultural identity of their people. This comparative eco-feminist approach explores how Erdrich and Morrison liberate woman and nature from oppressive phallogocentric and anthropocentric strangle holds.

Introduction

This study is centered upon the rationalization that the full spectrum of women's liberation involves the liberation of women too and that women cannot be said to be fully liberated unless nature is also liberated. The woman and nature are parallel to each other in experiencing male supremacy and degradation and in doing so reveal the ratiocination of the Western patriarchal system of binary oppositions in which men are dominant over women whereas culture is dominant over nature or environment. These patriarchal systems which are based on binary oppositions are a kind of capitalist structure of any society where women and nature both get

unjustified treatment. While feminism moves within the circumscribed boundaries of sexism, racism, and heterosexism to demonstrate the oppression of women, ecofeminism transcends these boundaries to incorporate the domination of nature. Thus the employment of ecofeminist theory for the analysis of Erdrich's *Tracks* (1988) and Morrison's *Paradise* (1997) provides insight into the reasons behind the domination of women and nature. Both delimited Native American and Afro-American texts affirm a solid connection between nature and culture, between "the forms of exploitation of nature and the forms of the oppression of women" (Murphy, 1995, p. 24). They envision a new world where all forms of human relationships are freed from the artificial divisions of dominating masculinity and dominated femininity and proposes an alternative that rejects domination of nature and women and promotes an earth-centred form of language that encourages ecological responsiveness, natural diversity and ecological multiculturalism in an attempt to redeem the earth from all forms of destruction and bondage. With the delimitation of *Tracks* and *Beloved*, this study unfolds the tale of ruthless and intolerable patriarchal structures within the predominantly red and black culture(s) hence deconstructs boundaries, hierarchies and limits set for women, especially colored women.

Literature Review

As this article deals with the discursive refashioning of the images of Afro-American and Native American women and their relation with the environment, the analysis of the selected female-authored texts inevitably entails the ecocritical and ecofeminist perspectives. Vandana Shiva (1989) argues that in the Afro-American and Native American women literature, there is an integral relationship between the domination of nature and women. Native and Afro-American traditions of environmental writings depict a profoundly symbiotic relationship between the human and non-human worlds. Women's survival struggles are deeply connected with the protection of nature. Given the interdependence of women and the environment, women cannot be said to be fully liberated unless nature is liberated also. That is why ecofeminism is described as a social movement that introduces a shared platform for both environmentalism and feminism and helps them get freedom from male dominance. If feminism, at the simplest and basic level, refers to a women's movement that strives to achieve equality of all sorts of rights for women in society, as Rhoda Reddock (1998) succinctly defines it "the awareness of oppression, exploitation and/or subordination of women within society and the conscious action to change and transform this situation" (p. 57), the ecocriticism and ecofeminism, according to Stock (2001) are not contradictory or antagonistic discourses rather they signify complementary approaches. Susan Griffin in her book, *Woman and Nature*, debates that "[p]atriarchal man in craze of controlling everything human and non-human dominates woman before woman controls him..." (p. 87). Foregrounding the interconnection between nature and women, Patrick M. Curry (2006) argues that the "same habitual structures of thought, feeling and action that devalue and harm women, also harm nature" (p. 95). Ecofeminism, for Ynestra

King (1989), unlike Western patriarchal binarism, does not (de)value one entity at the expense of the other; instead, it “show[s] the connection between all forms of domination including the domination of non-human nature” (p. 142). Warren argues that Ecofeminism is not antagonistic to ecocriticism; it is a variant organ of ecocriticism that theorizes the “domination of women and the domination of the natural environment” (cited in Estock, 2005, p. 3). According to him, there is a need more than ever to liberate women and the environment from the century’s old stranglehold of anthropocentrism and phallogocentrism. Doing away with the construction of patriarchal social structures, there is a need to realize the significance and emergency of building a harmonious social structure to allow humans, nature and women to co-exist and live peacefully. For Susan Prentice, ecofeminism believes in the interconnectedness of all forms of life and assumes “an essential human nature that transcends culture and socialization” (qtd. in Merchant, 1992, p. 193). Karen Warren (2001) underscoring the role of ecofeminism in deconstructing the discriminatory dualities of the Western phallogocentric thought system, describes the basis of ecofeminist philosophy. She exposes that women are pejoratively associated with the physical realm and nature, “while men are identified with the ‘human’ and mental realm” (Warren, 2001, p. 123). Now this systematic identification of woman with nature or physicality and of a man with human and mental or intellectual becomes the justification of the superiority of man over woman and hence the logic behind the subordination of woman.

Theoretical Framework

Deriving the comparative methodological approaches from Cheryll Glotfelty’s (1996) and Patricia H. Collins’ (1990) theoretical insights, this project explores within the domain of Afro- and Native American literature the nature of the relationship between women and land. Patricia Hill Collins (1990) validates Afro American women’s identity and challenges Western stereotypical images and construction of African American women by stressing upon women to assert their subjectivities by the process of self-actualization through concrete everyday life experiences. These contrastive, self-defining, images of the black women, according to Patricia, will both resist the dehumanizing discursive constructs of the black women perpetrated by the dominant system, and counter even reject internalized psychological oppression that Afro American women suffer from. In her classic work *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, she asserts the value of writing down every day lived experiences and sharing in confessional mode the innermost feelings. She writes “only the willingness to share private and sometimes painful experience can enable women to create a collective description of the world that is truly ours” (p.16).

Cheryll Glotfelty, the pioneer of ecocritical studies splits the prefixes ‘eco’ and ‘enviro’ to elucidate the anthropocentric and geocentric approaches: the former implies the dualistic nature of the relationship between humans and non-humans while the latter refers to an interdependent and integrated communal system.

Glotfelty's contradistinction between 'eco' and 'enviro' is complemented by the biocentric ecofeminist notions that consider a man apart, not the whole or the center, of the overall scheme of the universe. Therefore, any attempt to overcome the growing menace of environmental crisis would imply relinquishing the status of anthropocentrism and regarding the rights of the non-human constituents of nature. Feminism directs its target towards the presupposed patriarchal structures and institutions of the society, while ecofeminism starts with the assumption that patriarchy through its institutionalized oppressive power structures dominates women and nature in a bid to perpetuate its hegemonic control over anything that is not masculine. Ecofeminism being an eclectic and evolving set of ecocritical practices that posit alternate ways of reading literary and cultural artifacts by challenging inherited and traditional thinking in studying literature and culture attempts to explore the various dimensions of the interconnection between woman and nature as they are represented in literary and cultural texts. If men disregard females' associations with nature and carry on as per necessities of financial structures and do not prevent themselves from harming nature, the study of the indigenous and black female authors from ecocritical and ecofeminist perspectives "promote the exchange of ideas and information pertaining to literature that considers the study of the relationship between human beings and the natural world" (Glotfelty & Fromm, 1996, p. xviii). Even though men endeavor to isolate women from nature and enmesh them in man-made gender roles, women have a resilient association with nature.

An Ecofeminist Reading of Erdrich's *Tracks*

Tracks (1988) is the third novel of Erdrich among the sequence of four-novels which consists of *Love Medicine* (1984), *The Beet Queen* (1986), and *The Bingo Palace* (1994) and acts as a prologue to *Love Medicine*. All these four novels share similar settings as well as characters, that is, Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota. The novel fills in parts of the untold story of a tribe with the help of Nanapush's narration and portrayal. Nanapush, a trickster figure, and one of the central characters in the novel is an old storyteller-survivor who sees and knows reality from the trickster's point of view and provides valuable commentary over the past and present turn of events from Native American perspective and thus plays a variety of roles and serves a number of purposes.

Connection between Land and People

The novel describes the story of a specific group of people or family under review: it is Fleur Pillager's clan called the Ojibwe or Chippewa or the Anishinaabe. Erdrich (1988), herself related to the story of this tribe, describes their endurance against the loss of their Native land. The Native individuals by and large relied upon their territory for their nourishment and accommodation. The land is also a representation of a spiritual heritage for them, a reservoir of convictions and legends. There is an extremely solid bond between them and their land: Native Americans believe that they were conceived from the belly of Mother Earth and

hence there exists a natural bond between them and “the misty, generative womb of Mother Earth” (McGaa, 1990, p. 62). Since attachment to land determines their reality, loss of land makes that primal world crumble. *Tracks* depicts the Euroamerican seizure of the last ripe land, the Pillagers’ sacred place known for timber. Erdrich’s storyteller, Nanapush, demonstrates the competition of white man with Nature and laments over the end of ecological luxury. He tells Lulu Nanapush that “he guided the last buffalo hunt; he saw the last bear shot; he axed the last birch that was older than him and he “saved the [last] Pillager” (Erdrich, 1988, p.2). Old Nanapush is a replacement of the Native mother who narrates the tales of the past to her kids, a customary practice. He describes to Lulu the extermination of his tribe in consequence of the interaction with the Whites: “We started dying before the snow, and like the snow, we continued to fall” (Erdrich, 1988, p.1). As Lulu declines to call Fleur her mother (Erdrich, 1988, p. 2), Nanapush needs to place the young girl in a specific historical perception and location that will empower her to comprehend the explanations for her mom's deserving of her: “Granddaughter, you are the child of the invisible, the ones who disappeared ... Our tribe unraveled like a coarse rope, frayed at either end as the old and new among were taken” (Erdrich, 1988, pp. 1-2).

According to the Anishinaabe or Chippewa perception, the earth, sun, moon, and plants are family members and by ignoring the earth (land), the entire life arrangement of these individuals will be devastated. Pauline depicts her predicament when she first rejects her Native American family and moves to another town. She states that at the age of fifteen, she was terribly alone and so miserable that no one took notice of her in the shop: she was “ a skinny big-nosed girl with staring eyes” (Erdrich, 1988, pp. 15-16). Through Pauline's observation of her cultural position, readers experience her absence of significance in her working environment. Pauline makes no difference to the men working in the shop. She mixes into the “stained brown walls” (Erdrich, 1988, p. 16), similar shading as the earth. All the while, Pauline portrays herself nodding off, bringing down herself “into a mound of swept sawdust” (Erdrich, 1988, p.20). The shading association and her correlation with a stack of sawdust show the associations between Pauline and nature. Since Pauline analyzes herself in terms of nature around her and the shades of earth, she reinforces the relationship between her intangibility and the earth's under-appreciation.

From an ecofeminist perspective, Pauline’s troubles parallel the issues confronting the forest in the novel *Tracks*. For instance, the white development laborers in *Tracks* see land for its logging significance, giving it no idea until trade and industry come into the investigation: “But that spring outsiders went in as before, and some of us too. The purpose was to measure the lake. Only now they walked on the fresh graves of Pillagers” (Erdrich, 1988, p.8). The searching loggers do not see land for its inherent or intrinsic worth; the loggers disregard the land’s social and cultural significance when they step over the departed family's graves. Pauline states the indifference of men towards her and her work: “The men would not have seen me no matter what I did, how I moved” (Erdrich, 1988, p. 20). It is easy

to draw the interconnection between her deterioration and ecological abuse. As men possibly see Pauline when she works for them, the outsiders consider and observe land as logging cash, neglecting its cultural value. As Pauline goes unnoticed and underestimated, the earth is overlooked and used for monetary advantage. Erdrich effectively draws a parallel between Pauline as a woman and land as property from an ecofeminist perspective.

Parallelism between the Exploitation of Woman and Nature

Another prominent female character Fleur's downfall in the novel parallels the physical damage to natural surroundings. Earlier, Fleur is introduced as an incredibly solid and independent woman. Nanapush finds Fleur alone in a lodge, having survived a disease that killed her entire tribe. Nanapush describes her as "wild as a filthy wolf, a big bony girl whose sudden bursts of strength and snarling cries terrified the listening Pukwan" (Erdrich, 1988, p.3). She endures a sickness that killed her whole family. She is in harmony with Nature: she survives through severe cold just like a wolf that endures winter and extreme cold. Fleur is compared with Bear, whose hibernation in winter describes its rejuvenation and power. By depicting Bear-like qualities in Fleur, Erdrich demonstrates typical Native American mythological belief and the Native American vision that animals and human beings are the descendants of the same spirit. Native Americans proudly name themselves Bears, Horses, and Rabbits, Bulls etc. implying their harmony with all living creatures. They believe in intimacy between the animal and human life and the mysterious role animals play in human life by interfering in the affairs of human beings and helping them out in mysterious ways. This mythic Native American vision of the deep spiritual nature of the universe and its creations is encoded in 'Great mystery' that explains their intimate relationship with Nature and their anguish at their forced removal from their ancestral lands, and separation from nature and mother earth. Native American myths and visions are an attempt at understanding the complex pattern of the universe.

Fleur at Argus is brutally raped. Pauline describes that Fleur called for assistance from the two youngsters in the shop. She is isolated from the persona of 'the wolf'. Severing the link between Fleur and her 'animal' character symbolizes disconnection between the people and the environment. Fleur's rape demonstrates man's manipulation of women and nature. Erdrich describes rape as the most awful mistreatment a female could suffer. Fleur, after being abused, is destroyed entirely like the demolition of her property. Erdrich skillfully makes the connection between Fleur and her property. When loggers, at last, take Fleur's land and she loses her consciousness, the incident leaves a deep impact and sense of loss of both Fleur and the environment. Both Fleur and nature are weak against men that control them. When Fleur enters the lake in her suicide attempt, she draws power from the earth and its environment, carrying herself closer to the lake beast, Misshepeshu. Fleur's act of entering the lake suggests that despite her abuse and exploitation, she still has command over her life and the circumstances and has the ability to suffocate her

physical body so men can never again mistreat it. Nanapush depicts the incredible explanation of Fleur's activities: "Around me, a forest was suspended, lightly held. The fingered lobes of leaves floated on nothing. Nothing was solid. Each green crown was held in the air by no more than splinters of bark" (Erdrich, 1988, p.223).

Morrison's *Paradise*: An Ecofeminist Perspective

Paradise(1997), dominated by black women,embodies the interface of feminism and environmentally inspired by the second-wave feminist and ecological movements. Patriarchy's anthropocentric domination of the environment and women has aggravated the global ecological crisis. Morrison believes that, in the wake of escalating racial and environmental problems threatening the peace and harmony of the world, and ecologically harmonious society is the need of the hour, and this ideal can be realized by bringing about harmony between nature and human beings, eliminating racial and sexist biases, and paying attention to and following the eco-friendly ways of indigenous cultures. The ecofeminist analysis of *Paradise* will help understand the ecofeminist consciousness of Morrison and provide an insight into the urgency of balance between the environment and humans. It draws attention to indigenous cultures' holistic symbiotic relationship between all forms of human and environmental life to try to overcome the threatening ecological crisis.

***Paradise*: A World of Endogamous Blacks**

Paradise goes over fifty years back and is set in the 1960s and 1970s. It gives a clear delineation of women who live in a Convent in Ruby, a fictional town in Oklahoma. The central dispute is between these women and the men who run the Convent. Families in Ruby are constructing what they believe to be a nationalistic task nobody can truly run away from: "He can't fail at what he is doing. None of us can. We are making something" (Morrison, 1997, p. 240). Ruby is a town where just dark-colored people live and spend their lives freely, without any prejudice.

The treatment of the women signifies the man-centric culture unsettling their opportunities and decisions. The women who live in the Convent are Mavis, Grace, Consolata, Seneca, and Pallas, while the town's women who have their own sections are Patricia, Lone, and Save-Marie. *Paradise* develops a relationship between land and women. *Paradise* agonizingly follows the multigenerational journey of African American ranchers who settle in Oklahoma looking to build up an epitome of all-dark community. The men of this cumulative set up built two new towns: first Haven and afterward Ruby. But later on, these men become inflexible, losing their association with the regenerative wellbeing of women and land. Hedonistic patriarchy fails to maintain a relationship between the land and the people. It is the pahllogocentric Ruby society's disregard for nature that destroys Ruby and its dwellers. In fanatic pursuance of the American dream, the ancestors of the town raise unbridgeable boundaries between themselves and their women, their wives and daughters and the land they live on and ultimately it is the refusal to accept

nature's course and to form bonds with the environment that brings about the demise of the clan's descendants(Morrison, 1997, p. 245).

Ecofeminist Implications of Black Sexism

The ecofeminist slogan of the earth 'our sister' urges the people to recognize its rights. Afro-Americans treat nature with deep reverence and believe in partnership with it. In *Paradise*,Morrison has described the consequences of black sexism that, like its white counterparts, subdued the black women by imposing its power and patriarchal ideologies upon them and women could do nothing about it because they were just women, and what they said was easily ignored by good grave men. Besides, she suggested through the Oven metaphor that the black men, by not allowing any non-black person to be a part of the Ruby community, discriminate against the white much the similar way they were discriminated against.

The polarization between men and women in *Paradise* is so great that though women oppose men under patriarchic pressure, they remain silent. Women are required to have "existential courage to confront the experience of nothingness" (Daly, 1985, p.23). When there is a discussion, for instance, in the church about the plaque of the Oven, women are compelled to express their thoughts to themselves only. Mr. Steward's wife, Morgan, wanted to express her opinion that "Furrow of his brow' was enough for any age or generation" but finding her husband's counter-argument in the church meeting, she couldn't dare to disagree and continued her argument within herself saying "... nailing its meaning down was futile. The only nailing needing to be done had taken place. On the Cross. Wasn't that so?"(Morrison, 1997, p. 93)

Morrison shows several girls of diverse ethnicities living in the convent including a few Native American girls who have been severed from their tribal cultures. These Natives girls were forcibly taken away from their families who lived on the reservation in Oklahoma to teach them Christianity, white ways of living, white truths and white versions of history. In an attempt to kill their Indianness and to alienate them from their parents, their native religion, cultural practices, myths, beliefs and attitude towards life, they are prohibited from speaking the old language, wearing traditional dress and practicing their rituals. Oppressed as they are in the convent, excluded from their natural surroundings, and coerced to be assimilated into mainstream life patterns, they resist surrendering their souls for the glory of the Christian God, refuse to be assimilated and escape to their homes. The representation of Native American women's struggle in life against the unjust usurpation of their lands and the subsequent danger of the wiping away of their culture and religion may not be the primary concern of Morrison in *Paradise*, but by incorporating into Afro-American black women's narrative a strand of the racially abused Native women, she has shown a sense of solidarity with the oppressed Native women and suggested that when a woman, irrespective of race or class, is abused or oppressed in ways that hinder her fullest mental, social and cultural growth, the whole ecosphere suffers irrevocably because she is deeply associated

with the environment. Since due to patriarchal structures a woman is not allowed to achieve her goals as an individual within the society as is the case with the oppressed women in the convent, the entire ecosphere suffers.

The male-centric structure upheld by Christianity has stifled the voices and roles of women in the two marginalized communities. In both towns of Ruby and the Convent on the edges, women retain their considerations and sentiments so as not to be abused and belittled by the "legitimate" and masculine voices. However, in the predominantly patriarchal socio-political setup, no woman stays safe from the vicious activities of Ruby's finding fathers. Morrison (1997) demonstrates that these females have no power where to practice their alternatives and because of the male-centric condition of the Christian belief system that controls the land, the females are contained by the interlocking abuses. Her presentation serves as a bridge between past and present and helps her race recognize what things in the past were valuable and worth following and what were discardable: "I write ... what I have recently begun to call village literature, fiction that is really for the village, for the tribe..." (Morrison, 1997, p. xiii).

Conclusion

In a predominantly phallogocentric society where female sexuality is constantly suppressed and male sexuality imposes itself through violence and brutality, women seek to work out emancipatory ways to rearticulate their identities/subjectivities and womanhood. The study established through illustrations from the textual, theoretical and critical references that the dehumanization and exploitation of women and nature come through the same authority and agency (Gaard, 1993). It also demonstrated that Erdrich and Morrison as ecofeminists have been instrumental in revealing the relation between patriarchal suppression of women and the mutually reinforcing systems of social injustice. They have redefined the feminist movement in their respective narratives in order to successfully address the Native and Afro-American women's issues in a world in which women are still denied their social and sexual rights and that is fraught with patriarchal structures of violence, suppression and exploitation.

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