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Women and Nature in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: An Ecofeminist Approach

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Abstract

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is a complex picture involving woman, slavery, and history. However, Morrison had pictured nature as another dominant factor beside the three aspects mentioned. This research was aimed to reveal the messages implied through the natural aspects of the novel, especially those which were connected to the aspect of repression upon the women characters.

This research is a descriptive and qualitative one. In order to reveal these message, ecofeminism perspective was applied in this research, so that this research can be more comprehensive. Ecofeminism was built upon ecocriticism view, combined with feminist approach, so that the research was able to accommodate the typical characteristics of the novel, such as the application of the oppressed women characters, and the natural pictures applied as background. Based on the application of this perspective, the researchers concluded that Morrison had indeed used wilderness as another representation of oppression upon women in the novel.

Keywords: nature, women, oppression

Abstrak

Novel *Beloved* karya Toni Morrison adalah sebuah gambar kompleks yang melibatkan wanita, perbudakan, dan sejarah. Namun, Morrison juga menggambarkan alam sebagai faktor dominan lain di samping tiga aspek tersebut. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengungkapkan pesan tersirat melalui aspek alami dari novel, terutama mereka yang terhubung ke aspek represi pada karakter wanita.

Penelitian ini menggunakan metode deskriptif dan kualitatif. Dalam rangka untuk mengungkapkan pesan ini, perspektif ekofeminisme diterapkan dalam penelitian ini, sehingga penelitian ini dapat lebih komprehensif. Ekofeminisme dibangun di atas pandangan ecocriticism, dikombinasikan dengan pendekatan feminis, sehingga penelitian ini mampu mengakomodasi karakteristik khas novel, seperti penerapan karakter perempuan yang tertindas, dan gambar-gambar alam diterapkan sebagai latar belakang. Berdasarkan penerapan perspektif ini, para peneliti menyimpulkan bahwa Morrison memang menggunakan alam liar sebagai representasi lain dari penindasan terhadap perempuan dalam novel.

Kata kunci: alam, perempuan, opresi

INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison's works are identical with unspoken women voice, i.e. the stories of oppressed women. *Beloved*, is also a kind that tells the stories of women in the slavery era of America. It has been analyzed by many critics from

various angles because of its richness in the aspect of story, text, or context. Most studies or criticism views this object from gender point of view, because it tells about women. The dynamic portraits reflects insights coming from psychoanalysis,

critical race theory, trauma theory, and black feminist thought (Li, 2010).

Beloved gained wide recognition of this novel from the American public. Compared to other novels, it is this novel that gets official legitimacy, which is related to the achievement of Pulitzer for the fictional category in 1988. Based on these facts, researchers assume that this novel has at least an effect or at least direct contact with the American society in real terms.

Beloved is set in 1873, when the American Civil War was not long enough ended. Sethe, an enslaved woman, carried her youngest daughter, Denver, ran away from the plantation to Ohio, in search of a freedom. However, the freedom they got had not been as good as they imagined. The local community, which was a black community, did not accept them completely due to the past life of Sethe.

The other important thing can be noticed from this novel is the strong realistic description of nature. Both as realistic sets and imaginary sets in the characters mind appeared in the novel in bold descriptions. This is the aspect that was then became the formal object being discussed in this research article. However, the other bold description must not be left behind is the gender aspect, since the central of the story is indeed about women. Therefore, an ecocriticism and feminism

had been chosen as the approach to discuss this novel.

Glotfelty and Fromm (1996)⁹ simply put ecocriticism as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment, ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies. This term has been a phenomenon in academic studies in the last two decades. It came along with other disciplines that also considered that an ecological perspective is an important aspect to discuss regarding the human nature nowadays. It is very important to speak about nature and any messages that deals with nature nowadays, when ecosystem become a major concern.

On the other hand, feminism is a simpler term, yet hard to describe in as single explanation. Though we can say that this term is simply a thinking or movement of dealing with women and the search of equality. Abrams and Harpham (2005: 110)⁸ stated that in our time, much of feminist literary criticism continues to be interrelated with the movement by political feminists for social, legal, and cultural freedom and equality. The important term to be noticed is that feminism may always be related to political reasons, in broad way.

Since there was to major concern about the “tool” in analysis, the writer, then, chose the combination of both

theory, ecofeminism. Many critics have started with this theory to use it as approach.¹⁰ According to Gaard (1993), ecofeminism is a theory that has evolved from various fields of feminist inquiry and activism. She said that the activism may refer to¹² peace movements, labor movements, women's health care, and the anti-nuclear, environmental, and animal liberation movements. These kinds of movement and activity are what the writer considered as political, in a broad understanding.

The problem that had underlie the research is what and how are the nature depicted in the novel. There has been answers for each symbols, expression, or sets thatv are related to the nature and environment.

The application of such "hybrid" approach may very useful in any research, not only because it is a contemporary issue, but because discussion about environment may beneficial to support environmental problems solving. This, thus, enable any literary products to be seen from its relation to the environment and politics. In *Beloved*, for instance, the term of oppression may not only be seen from the patriarchy, but also from the nature, or contrarily, the nature may have been the positive side that stands along with the women.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research is a descriptive one. It is because this is a literary research which definitely cannot apply quantitative method. Data, both primary and secondary was obtained from the novel and related books. Besides, this research I made to answer the question "what, why, and how".

This is, of course, not the first research using ecocriticism or ecofeminism. Previous ecocriticism has been applied on Toni Morrison's *Beloved* in Andrea Kate Campbell's dissertation in 2010, entitled *Third Wave Ecocritical Approach to Toni Morrison, Ruth Ozeki, and Octavia Butler*. However, this research has somewhat tried to analyze intensely, since it focuses only in one novel.

A Hybrid Theory

There are not many scholars have formulated specifically about ecofeminism as a literary theory. This term is more a term to describe phenomena, movements, and idealistic thoughts. One formulation capable in bridging the term into the field of literature is¹⁴ Gretchen Legler, in her essay, *Ecofeminist Literary Criticism*. Legler in Warren (ed) (1997 : 227) stated that⁷ ecofeminist literary criticism is a hybrid criticism, a combination of ecological environmental criticism and

feminist literary criticism. The term hybrid came to explain that it is not a pure single theory that has a single understanding and method. It is more a multi-perspective being derived from many concepts, because ecocriticism is a wide-range perspective while feminism came from many thoughts applied, from sociology to psychology to post-structuralism.

The ecocriticism itself has a tight relationship with post-structuralism. according to Abrams and Harpham (2005),¹¹ it is a critique of binaries such as man and nature or culture and nature. They are viewed as mutually exclusive oppositions.

The thing should be noted is that it is on the other area with naturalism. Naturalism speaks about nature as something simply as an important object to be focused on. Ecocriticism, on the contrary focused on how and what for the nature is being drawn inside the literary works. They, then, consider that somehow, the ecocriticism has expanded into a more specific view, that is the merging of ecocriticism and the feminist view.

A conspicuous feature in ecocriticism is the analysis of the differences in attitudes toward the environment that are attributable to a writer's race, ethnicity, social class, and gender. The writings of Annette Kolodny gave impetus to what has come to be called ecofeminism—the analysis of the role attributed to women in fantasies of the natural environment by male authors, as well as the study of specifically feminine conceptions of the

environment in the neglected nature writings by female authors. In *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (1975), Kolodny stresses, in male-authored literature, the predominant gendering of the land as female, and the accordant tendency to resort to nature for pastoral repose, recuperation, and gratification. She also proposes a parallel between the domination and subjugation of women and the exploitation and spoliation of the land. (Abrams and Harpham, 2005: 89)

The terms like race, ethnicity, social class, and gender, like what Abrams and Harpham said reflects how this merged view has accepted many perspectives. This, may ensure that a research may be more comprehensive using this perspective.

However, Abrams and Harpham's postulate on ecofeminism is too rigid to apply. This is because their view about ecofeminism is strictly limited on male writers. What about female writers?

The definition of Legler (2007) is more suitable, because her concept does not limit the writer's gender. The environmental problems or crises should be an attention should be paid into by the writers. In that way, there are two main points dealing with the arguments of ecofeminist, those are:

- ¹⁶ 1. Dealing with practical environmental problems is both an ecological and feminist task. It is because the problem is made by the¹⁸ patriarchal environmental ethic. This ethic has conceptualized land as "woman". It is, then, what

influences ¹⁷ the definition/ term of nature and what is natural.

2. Construction of the nature as women/ female, e.g. the term “virgin”, and “mother”, are essential to the maintenance of the harmful environmental ethic and are essential to the maintenance of the hierarchical ways of thinking that justify the oppression of various “others” of patriarchal culture by ranking them “closer to nature” or by declaring them ¹³ “natural” or “unnatural”. Concerning this, then, ¹³ reimagining what nature is and what relationship can exist between human and nonhumans is part of the elimination of the institutionalized oppression on the basis of race, gender, class, and sexual preference and part of what may assist in changing the abusive environmental practices.

Simply, the nature in ecocriticism is placed in the same position as women/ female in the scope of feminism. It goes along with the perspective of ⁴ Davion (1994) in Garaard (2004: 23), that women have been associated with nature, the material, the emotional, and the particular. Meanwhile, men have been associated with culture, the nonmaterial, the rational, and the abstract.

Based on the concept, it can be seen that the the term “hybrid” deals with the combination of the perspective of ecocriticism and feminism. They can be put together because either nature or women are the “victims” of patriarchal cultural concept and practices. Both are the objects of patriarchal abusive practices.

Emancipatory Strategies

Somehow, ecofeminism cannot be separated from idealistic purpose, especially in literature. The purpose may almost always deals with the term “emancipation. Legler (2007: 230) wrote that the emancipation may be in the form of efforts ¹⁴ to reimagine nature and human in the natural world. In delivering the idealism, there should be strategies, those are:

1. By “Re-mything” ⁶ nature as speaking, “bodied” subject.
2. Erasing or blurring boundaries between inner and outer. Inner is pointed out on the terms like semotional, psychological, and personal, while outer does on geographic/ landscape ⁴ factors. It can also be done by blurring of self—other (human/ non—human, I/ Thou) distinctions.
3. Re-eroticizing human relationship with a “bodied” landscape.

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4. Historicizing and politicizing nature and the author as a participant in the nature.
5. Expressing an ethic of caring friendship, or a "loving eye," as a principle for relationship with nature.
6. Attempting to unseat vision, or "mind" knowledge, from a privileged position as a way of knowing, or positing the notion that "bodies" know.
7. Affirming the value of partial views and perspectives, the importance of "bioregions" and the locatedness of human subjects.

These strategies may not appear all at once, but may be used optional. However, the pivotal point is that there should be a juxtaposition on the hierarchical construction of the female/feminine, male/masculine, culture, and nature.

DISCUSSION

The first things might cross the mind of the readers of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* are about women, slavery, ghost, and rough life. Next, there might be questions about historical aspects in this story, because some sets are apparently built upon historical events.

Apart from the historical background which are claimed by many critics, settings in Morrison's *Beloved* are built in very realistic

features. Details are things among others that make this novel worth best appreciation in terms of narratology because they make people may even doubt that it is a fiction or real. However, this discussion was not built upon narratological theory. The natural and realistic details of settings were the building elements in getting data about the nature.

Winter, Women, Jungle

In the beginning of the novel, Morrison described how the environment had brought a certain difficulty on Sethe and her family.

Winter in Ohio was especially rough if you had an appetite for color. Sky provided the only drama, and counting on a Cincinnati horizon for life's principal joy was reckless indeed. So Sethe and the girl Denver did what they could, and what the house permitted, for her. Together they waged a perfunctory battle against the outrageous behavior of that place; against turned-over slop jars, smacks on the behind, and gusts of sour air (Morrison, 2007: 4).

This expression shows that the climate has certain characteristics that are not friendly. Although the winter has unfortunate effect on the women, it does not mean that the nature has also given an oppression on the women. The unfriendly characteristics are just characteristics, and it deals with anybody.

The sentence showed that it is unfriendly to everybody, not just on men, women, or any color. It said that the winter plays rough on anybody with the appetite of color. This maybe the realistic

figuration of winter in Ohio, but the way Morrison describe tells that the winter is made as a “bodied” object. It may not be animated, but it has characteristics. It does not bother so much on Sethe and her daughter, because they do not really have the “appetite of color”. But the winter has become one of the reasons why the two older sons of Sethe had left their house.

The other description about nature is in the other part of the novel, where Morrison describe about the relationship of colored people with the river.

The simple problem to be dealt with concerning the context of this novel is that one of these novels sets the setting back in the United States during slavery. The most widely used places for story setting are Kentucky, Ohio, and the area surrounding these two areas.

In the period of slavery and the post-enslavement period, including in the era of civil war, these regions did have an important role in history. Kentucky is the northernmost region of wavelength, while Ohio is the southernmost region of anti-slavery. Both areas are bordered by the Ohio River, which is a crossing area of slave seeking for freedom.

The Ohio River seem to become to be the separator between the freedom and the slavery. Every colored slave tend to cross the river in search for freedom.

In the other part of novel, Morrison reflected the structure of white—dark—nature relation.

Very few had died in bed, like Baby Suggs, and none that he knew of, including Baby, had lived a livable life. Even the educated colored: the long-school people, the doctors, the teachers, the paper-writers and businessmen had a hard row to hoe.

...
Whitepeople 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 coloredpeople 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 whitefolks 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. (Morrison, 2007:120)

The lines show that that there is a hierarchy in the cultural life. There are three related elements in the statement, those are white people, black/ dark people, also jungle and the life in it. In this case, the center/ “I” is white people, while dark people, just as nature is the “other”.

In many respects, “I” has the privilege of giving judgments/ valuation towards the “others”. It is said that no

matter any profession or economic class can be gained by the "other", hierarchically, the "I" is always on the top.

In various condition, the type of women characteristics may be different, because cultural and social context may influence. Therefore, the conception of nature/ women may refer to beauty, soft, weak, etc. In this novel, the briefest description is that the dark skinned people are like jungle, dangerous, wild, hard to control. This is of course include the dark women. This kind of conception appeared because the context in the novel is slavery.

In these cultures, women have historically been seen as closer to the earth or nature (perhaps due to childbirth and menstruation). Also, women and nature have been juxtaposed against mind and spirit, which have been associated in Western cosmology with the "masculine" and elevated to a higher plane of being (Birkeland, 1993: 18)

Animal

The "other" side in the ecofeminism perspective may also refer to animals. As Gruen (1996: 61) said that women and animal have connection, but ⁵ this connection is not to be understood as a mere "natural" connection—one that suggests that women and animals are essentially similar-but it is rather a constructed connection that has been created by the patriarchy, as a means of oppression.

This is also reflected in *Beloved*. There is a particular animal, that is antelope. This animal, though is imaginary, appear in the novel.

A dying thought if ever there was one, and she waited for the little antelope to protest, and why she thought of an antelope Sethe could not imagine since she had never seen one. She guessed it must have been an invention held on to from before Sweet Home, when she was very young. Of that place where she was born (Carolina maybe? or was it Louisiana?) she remembered only song and dance.

...

And oh but when they danced and sometimes they danced the antelope. (Morrison, 2007: 21)

From this part of the novel, it can be seen that the antelope is actually a symbol. In Western culture, this animal is known only living in Africa and Eurasia. The animal has the characteristic of hard to capture, agile, and maybe dangerous.

For dark colored people, antelope is symbol of their dream about freedom, and their motherland. It is assumed that way because it is told in the novel that Sethe has never seen such animal. However, she just knew, and appeared to have a memory of a ritual involving movements like antelope, thus, it can be assumed that in the novel, the antelope is a symbol for the African cultural society.

This is the emancipatory strategy that is built by Toni Morrison. By

presenting the image of antelope, she affirmed the value of partial views and perspectives, the importance of “bioregions” and the locatedness of human subjects.

CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that the natural elements appeared in *Beloved* is not a mere settings. This research does not tend to specify whether the writer can be considered as an ecofeminist or not, but to find points that reflects ecofeminist idealism.

There are at least two strategies used by Morrison as “emancipatory strategies” in this novel, those are:

1. “Re-mything” nature as speaking, “bodied” subject.
2. Affirming the value of partial views and perspectives, the importance of “bioregions” and the locatedness of human subjects

This research is far from perfect, so that such writings may be performed in Indonesia, especially in the field of comparative literature. Ecological perspective may become the solution for current ecological problems.

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