

## Return to the Natural Home

### -A Study of Toni Morrison's *Home* from the Perspective of Ecofeminism

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#### Abstract:

*Home* is the tenth novel of Toni Morrison- first and so far the only one female African American writer who has won Nobel Prize. Through a story of a black brother and sister who run away from home and finally choose to return, Morrison shows her unique interpretation and thinking about racial and female problem. In the light of descriptions and metaphors about nature and female throughout the book, this thesis will employ the theory of ecofeminism to analyze the relationship of female and nature, the mysterious ecofeminism practice of women in community and the enlightenment of this novel to solve sexual and ecological problem.

**Key words:** *Home*; Ecofeminism; nature; female

#### 1. Introduction

In 1974, "Ecofeminism" was first put forward by French feminist scholar Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le Feminisme ou la Mort*, and she believed there was a direct connection between oppressions upon female and nature. Involving both ecologism and feminism, but ecofeminism does not just a superposition of them; it contains its own unique and profound connotations. Its various aspects include: "The critique of patriarchal representation of nature as female, revisionist rediscovery of the importance of women's roles in the history of natural history, scientific studies and natural writing, the advocacy of an 'ethics of care' toward nature as against an ethics of extraction or exploitation, and the restoration of the mysterious (biological or spiritual) affinity between women and nature."(Campbell, 1996:127). Toni Morrison, as a leader in the third black literature, has been using her pen as weapon to fight in the war of race and sex and harvesting tremendous fruit. Published in 2012, *Home* is the tenth novel of Toni Morrison. Set in American of

1950s, it tells a story about a war- traumatized black soldier Frank Money who saves his sister, prey of modern medical experiment, and cured her with the help of women in black community; eventually they return to their southern community. As Morrison once said that she observes the world; she understands the world; she writes the world and it's the black world. (Morrison, 1985:118) As usual, Morrison comforts wounded African Americans, nature and female with her original insight.

Since publication, *Home* has drawn numerous scholars to analyze and study, mainly from the perspectives of identifications of characters, feminism, racism, space politics and narrative techniques, which were also commonly adopted in other Morrison's works. While this thesis will use an emerging theory-ecofeminism, through close reading, to analyze this novel and explore the relationship of female and nature, the mysterious ecofeminism practice of women in community and the enlightenment to solve sexual and ecological problem. In the end, through the return of home, of humanity and of nature, people can understand that behind the return there is Morrison's calling and wish for harmonious and equal racial and sexual relationship.

## 2. Garden and Fruit-Metaphors of Ecofeminism

Throughout history, at home or abroad, female and nature are inextricably linked and in the sight of ecofeminists, female and nature themselves are integrated. As Irene Diamond and Gloria Orenstein described in their ecofeminism work *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism* that due to the special role female plays in biological reproduction, our body becomes an important sign, showing the characters of place, area and even the planet. (Diamond and Orenstein, 1990:45) especially in literature, "female is 'naturalized' and nature is 'feminized'"(LuoTing & XiePeng, 2004:178). According to Freud's psychoanalytic theory of dream, water, pond, sea, moon and kinds of flowers are representations of female. *Home* is a novel about the life of living state of female especially black female. In this novel, garden and fruit are two significant symbols. In the eyes of ecofemanism, through the description of the beauty of nature, Morrison is softly making a web intertwined by nature and female, so readers can feel the beauty of female world without consciousness.

"Female imagery can include caves, rooms, walled-in gardens (like the ones we see in the paintings representing the Virgin Mary), cups, or enclosures and containers of any kind."(Tyson, 2006:22). In *Home*, garden is a significant symbol which is repeatedly mentioned and elaborately described by author. "under her care pole beans curved, then straightened to advertise their readiness. Strawberry tendrils wandered, their royal-scarlet berries shinning in morning rain. Honeybees gathered to salute *Illicium* and drink the juice. Her garden was not Eden; it was so much more than that."(Morrison, 2012: 130). Under Morrison's description, using vinegar-seasoned water to kill slugs and crushed newspaper to drive away bold raccoons, community women employ the most natural and original way to take care of their gardens. As ecofeminists advocate, human need to integrate with nature rather than exploit and destroy it at the process of industrialization and mechanization. M. Horkheimer and T. W. Adorno, representatives of the Frankfurt School once

wrote in their master work *Dialectics of Enlightenment* that when human lose the consciousness -himself is part of nature, all the aims, social progress, material and spiritual power, and consciousness itself, which human maintain in life, become meaningless. ( Horkheimer, Adorno, 1993:222) In fact black women's careful and elaborate care of garden is their protection of nature, and more importantly is their defend for their sex role and their identity as African American.

At the same time, in the end of chapter four, the melon young sister Cee and her friend Sarah pick is an important symbol with strong ecofeminism color. When Sarah picks up a male melon, "she snorted". (Morrison, 2012: 66) while when Cee lifted a female one, "'well, hallelujah.' Sarah joined Cee's laughter with a low chuckle. 'always the sweetest.'" "always the juiciest," "can't beat the girl for flavor.", "can't beat her for sugar" (Morrison, 2012:66) literally, author is talking about melon while in fact she is connecting female's tender and sweetness with fruit's deliciousness so as to show the fusion of female and nature. When Sarah cut the female melon with a long and sharp knife, Morrison wrote "cut the girl in two." (Morrison, 2012: 66) so she regards the melon directly as Cee, and the division of melon symbolizes Cee's suffering under the doctor's scalpel. At the same time, the knife to melon is what human to nature and what male to female. When Frank saved Cee and carried her out, Morrison deliberately described "some dogwood blossoms, drooping in the heat, fell as Sarah shut the door." (Morrison, 2012:113). The flower is Cee. The drooping and dying of it symbolizes that Cee, as a black female, becomes the victim of immoral medical experiment.

Also in another important story about Korean girl, there are two symbols with profound meaning- rotten orange and tight bamboo. According to Freud's psychoanalytic theory of dream, fruit usually stands for female. From the perspective of ecofeminism, orange symbolizes Korean girl. It becomes rotten and black implies the girl's miserable suffering under the war. "anything not metal, glass or paper was food to her."(Morrison, 2012: 95). Under the description of the author, this speechless garbage girl is not a person, just like the rotten orange is not a really orange. The rot of the orange forebodes withering of the girl's life. Meanwhile by the Freud's psychoanalytic theory of dream, all images whose length exceeds their diameter can be seen as male or phallic symbols. The bamboo symbolizes male. The girl searches food in the bamboo forest means that she intrudes male-dominated eco-environment which eventually leads to her death.

Therefore in *Home*, Morrison elaborately makes a web of nature and female. The prosperity of garden is the boom of nature and the female community; while the destruction of nature symbolizes the hurt of female. From the perspective of ecofeminism, *Home*, through images as garden and fruit, tactfully reveals the solidary relationship between female and nature in front of readers.

### **3. The Treatment of Cee-The Practice of Ecofeminism**

Raised in a black family with story-telling tradition, Morrison knows the magical and supernatural elements of black folk culture very well, so people always can find unique African cultural beliefs and customs. Her fantasy imagination makes her works with magic realistic color like the legend in Song of Solomon that black people can fly and the rabbit captor Tar Baby. While unlike Gabriel Garcia Marquez, the author of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Morrison's

imagination is influenced by American black culture and based on her own racial experience. In *Home*, the most mysterious part is the treatment community women make to save Cee. They use the most original and natural approach and actually carry out an ecofeminism experience.

When Frank carries Cee out of doctor's home, "her feet not even mimicking steps, she was feather-light." (Morrison, 2012: 113). She has suffered the oppression not only from the male but also from the immoral medical experience; just like the nature suffering from human's industrialization and mechanization. Alice Walker, another black female writer with strong ecofeminism awareness, once describes the image constantly appears in her mind that man pinches the throat of the earth, shaking it while shouting 'give, give, give'. They kept squeezing; as long as the earth still breath, they never give up. (McQuade & Atwan ,1997:215 ) The pain Cee suffers from her boyfriend and the doctor is physical as well as psychological.

Chapter 13 tells that under the two-month effort and trying of community women, Cee achieves recovery and change physically and psychologically; eventually it is her own culture and belief that has saved her. From May to July, "women took turns nursing Cee and each had a different recipe for her cure." (Morrison, 2012:119). They use root and herb gradually treat her bleeding, infection and finally go to her repairment. From the beginning to the end, black women treat this oppressed girl with the most mysterious and time-honored way; just like the protection environmentalists make to damaged nature or the self-healing state when nature is ignored by human. At the last stage, in order to get thorough cure, Cee has to spend at least one hour a day with her legs spread open to the blazing sun since "each woman agree that that embrace would rid her of any remaining womb sickness." (Morrison, 2012:124). So the Sun plays an indispensable role in ecological operation as well as in Cee's cure; as the flower which will wither without sunshine and will regain vigor and vitality nurtured by the Sun. This also reflects the core ideology of ecofeminism :female and nature are naturally bonded. There is an important link between the oppression upon women and the domination on the nature. (Warren, 2000:21.) Ecofeminism believes that any effort to set the oppressed free will make no sense without the struggle for the liberation of nature (Jin Li, 2004: 57). So solving ecological crisis and emancipating woman must be the common goal of mankind.

At the same time, ingeniously, Frank is separated from Cee's whole treatment. With different cures, "What they all agree upon was his absence from her bedside." (Morrison, 2012:119). This plot, from the perspective of ecofeminism, shows that woman need to count on their own strength and the power of nature to resolve the oppression.

#### **4. Return to the Natural Home-The Enlightenment of Ecofeminism**

European 'masculine' is associated with reason, spirit, culture, autonomy, self-confidence and the public domain, whereas 'feminine' is associated with emotions, bodies, correlations, passivity and personal domains. (Spretnak, 1997:63) For ecofeminism, female and nature respectively suffer the oppression of patriarchy and anthropocentrism. The unequal and passive role of woman is just like the nature in front of human's exploitation. In *Home*, the opposition between male and female,

nature and human is fully showed in many details and metaphors, but ecofeminism does not just focus on the binary opposition. In fact it advocates using harmony of nature and female to solve the contradiction between man and woman and human and nature. So Morrison chooses a meaningful and thought-provoking ending: by returning to natural home, man and woman, nature and human achieve reconciliation.

In this novel, Frank suffers transitory color blindness after he comes back to America, “All color disappeared and the world became a black-and-white movie screen.” (Morrison, 2012:23). This is actually a metaphor for the discrimination and segregation of black people at that time in America, which decolor all African Americans’ life. Finally it is the Sun, the strength of nature that enables him to see color again. Meanwhile, he was physically and mentally tortured by war. But his decadence stopped once he met his girl friend Lily. “I felt like I’d come home.” (Morrison, 2012:68). All of these imply that female and nature both have therapeutical and soothing effect. In *Home*, there are materialization of female and destroy of nature, for example, in Frank’s illusion, Lily’s face becomes front of Jeep. All kinds of female supplies and the high-heels show the physical and psychological constraint of society towards woman. Bloody battlefield is the ravaged nature; gray and severe ecological environment deprive people of conscience which leads to Korean girl’s death. The heat black people suffering during forced move symbolizes the racial oppression at that age.

Therefore nature and female share the same pain but Morrison does not indulge in the charge of oppression. She finds natural salvation for exploited woman from ecofeminism. In the end Cee get rid of her boyfriend. Through the mysterious and natural cure, she has achieved her rebirth physically and psychologically. Lily leaves Frank and begins her independent struggle. The well-kept garden provides care and protection to female as well as the nature. In the end Frank and Cee return to home. At the end of the novel, they go back to the stud-farm. It is burnt down and abandoned by human, turning out to be original grassland. Frank uses the quit knitted by Cee representing the black culture to rebury the black man they saw at childhood. This killed man represents the racial problem at that time which also exists today. Cee’s quit stands for the culture and history of African American. These two most tough and complicated problem in human society eventually fuse into the land with Frank’s bury. This disperses the haze in Frank’s heart and reshapes Cee. At that moment, nature embraces various human’s problems with its generousness. This is also the best enlightenment of ecofeminism towards these two problems, which is, returning to natural home.

## 5. Conclusion

If we really want to create an ecological society, then it should not only be one free of harmful substances and threat of ecological disaster, one free from racial discrimination, gender discrimination, imperialism and capitalist. (Zimmerman, 1994:11) As a thriving theory, ecofeminism connects the female and nature, the gender relationship and the relationship between human and nature. “[I]argely because degraded images of black women have persisted throughout

history, both in and out of literature....Black women novelists[and, we might add, poets and playwrights as well] have assumed throughout their tradition a revisionist mission aimed at substituting reality for stereotype”(Tyson, 2006:389-390). In *Home*, as well as other works "The Afro-American women portrayed by Morrison suffer from spiritual alienation or even insanity in consequence of racial oppression, sexual discrimination, and hurt from the dominant cultural values" (Jiao Xiaoting, 2004:103). In this novel, Toni Morrison uses a lot of female symbols with profound meaning and vivid nature descriptions to make a web of nature and female. Through positive female characters like Lily, Cee and community women represented by Ethel, the images related with female family life like quilting and garden-caring, Morrison leads readers to reevaluate female rules, female value and the relationship between female and nature. Criticism is appreciation and judgment, so it applies and contains the standards, principles, and concepts, a theory and aesthetics, and ultimately it is a philosophy as well as a world view (Rene Wellek , 1998: 298). From the perspective of ecofeminism, in this novel, Frank and Cee finally return to their natural home; the oppressed soul of that black man get peace by integrating with the earth. As the sweet bay in the poem of the last chapter “It looked so strong/So beautiful/Hurt right down the middle/But alive and well.” (Morrison, 2012:147), in the eyes of ecofeminism, the female, the black people, the soldier and the poor, who have been suffering a lot throughout history, can and will get strength from nature and flourish sturdily.

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