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Oppression and Symbiosis: An Ecofeminist Perspective of *The Bluest Eye*

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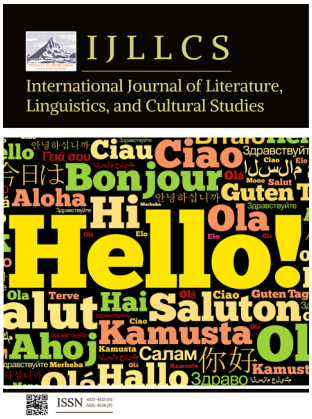

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Abstract: In her seminal work *The Bluest Eye*, African American female writer Toni Morrison focuses on the tragic story of Pecola, a black girl who suffers from racial discrimination, domestic violence and sexual assault since her childhood, and is deeply inferior in the white culture-dominated society, and finally seeks for recognition and acceptance with the desire to have a pair of blue eyes. At the same time, this novel also depicts natural imagery such as withered marigolds, sandy land, and violent storms, which mirror each other with the fate of the characters, revealing the deep connection between race, gender, and ecological violence. Therefore, from an ecofeminist perspective, this paper analyzes the relations of oppression, resistance and connection embedded in the gender and ecological dimensions of the work. Black women and nature, represented by Pecola, are violated and oppressed by patriarchal men and human beings, and Claudia's sisters resist and rebel against them by tearing up the white dolls and the emergence of the phenomenon of land barrenness. Finally, Pecola's wish for marigolds is a deep connection and integration between women and nature on a spiritual level. This paper aims to provide inspiration and reference for solving the long-standing problems of race, gender and ecology under the patriarchal society, and to inject more humanistic care into the rapidly developing post-industrial society nowadays.

Keywords: *The Bluest Eye*; Toni Morrison; ecofeminism; patriarchy

1. Introduction

As the first black female writer in the history of American literature to win the Nobel Prize for Literature, Toni Morrison's work consistently centers the lived experiences of Black communities, dissecting issues of race and gender with distinctive narrative techniques and profound insight. Her debut novel, *The Bluest Eye*, set in 1940s Lorain, Ohio, portrays the devastating trajectory of Pecola Breedlove, whose yearning for blue eyes as a means to escape discrimination and violence culminates in profound psychological disintegration. Throughout the narrative, images of withered marigolds and desiccated land are inextricably entwined with the destinies of Black women. These elements function both realistically and metaphorically, signifying the pervasive "oppression" enacted by patriarchal forces, while also hinting at a "symbiotic" vision of interdependence and shared hope between women and nature amidst adversity.

At present, scholarly interpretations of *The Bluest Eye* have predominantly focused on themes such as racial trauma, gender politics, and narrative strategies [1]. Foreign research often emphasizes the deep cultural mechanisms of oppression and the narrative artistry used to represent trauma. For instance, Barbara Christian deconstructs the symbolism of "blue eyes" and emphasizes its role in shaping Pecola's identity; Judith Herman

interprets Pecola's madness as a result of collective trauma imposed by systemic racism within the Black community; Gérard Genette observes that the novel's fragmented narrative and disrupted seasonal structure symbolically represent the lasting impact of trauma; Homi Bhabha argues that white aesthetic standards are internalized as the "ideal self" through media and consumer culture. Domestic research frequently concentrates on the identity crises and psychological complexities of Black women. Liu Ning analyzes the intertwined challenges of racial and gender discrimination confronting Black women; Li Guiqiong, adopting a Black feminist approach, highlights Morrison's awareness of Black feminist identity and underscores the importance of self-affirmation and cultural independence for Black women; Peng Hui discusses how the influence of white culture contributes to the tragic experiences of Black women [2]. However, existing research often treats natural imagery merely as environmental description or symbolic motifs within the contexts of racial trauma and sexism, neglecting the implicit connections between women and nature, and the issue of human exploitation of the natural world. These studies fail to address how images like the barren land reflect human-induced ecological destruction and the potential deep-seated links between this destruction and the oppressions of race and gender [3]. For example, Pecola invests her hopes for new life in the growth of marigolds; their withering coincides with the death of her unborn child, reflecting the shared fate of women and nature under oppression [4]. Simultaneously, the discrimination Pecola faces when buying "Mary Jane" candy adorned with the image of a blue-eyed white girl parallels humanity's encroachment upon nature, demonstrating their shared position as the oppressed. An ecofeminist perspective provides the crucial lens through which this interconnection between women and nature can be analyzed. This paper, therefore, adopts an ecofeminist framework to examine the isomorphic structures of natural alienation alongside racial and gender oppression, exploring the resistance and deep bonds between women and nature.

Ecofeminism, emerging in the mid-to-late 20th century as a confluence of the women's liberation and environmental movements, fundamentally reveals the deep connections between the domination of women and the exploitation of nature. It provides a novel framework for interpreting the intertwined dilemmas of race, gender, and ecology within literary texts. Combining feminist and ecological thought, ecofeminism focuses on the intrinsic links between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature. The theory posits that these oppressions are not isolated but share profound historical and conceptual roots. As French feminist Françoise d' Eaubonne asserted, "the oppression of women is directly linked to the oppression of nature." Carolyn Merchant similarly argues that "the domination of nature and the domination of women stem from the same ideological framework." This shared ideological foundation lies in the dualistic thinking inherent in oppressive social structures like patriarchy, which constructs hierarchies such as male/female, human/nature, and mind/matter, positioning the former as superior and entitled to dominate the latter [5].

In *The Bluest Eye*, male violence against women and human plundering of nature share a similar logic, while the connection between women and nature harbors the potential for resistance, resonating powerfully with core ecofeminist propositions. Jin Li noted that "the primary tenet of ecofeminism is the identification of women with nature." Building on this, this paper employs ecofeminist theory to analyze the "double oppression" within the text—male control over women and human exploitation of nature. It then explores possibilities and instances of "resistance"—women's subtle defiance of gender violence and nature's resilient response to exploitation. Finally, it reveals the healing power of "interconnection," examining the harmonious symbiotic relationship that emerges between women and nature through their shared existence.

2. Burden and Fetters: The Double Oppression of Interlocking Powers

Chen Maolin contends: "The root cause of oppression for both nature and women is identical: the dominance of patriarchal culture." The dualistic logic of patriarchal society constructs a nested system of oppression, which *The Bluest Eye* renders concrete through its narrative, manifesting as physical trauma inflicted upon Black women and ecological trauma inflicted upon nature [6]. From the perspective of gender, gender oppression also permeates the Black community itself, fueled by the internalization of white aesthetic standards. Geraldine, Pecola's classmate, deeply influenced by white norms, meticulously emulates white lifestyles and beauty ideals, positioning herself as superior within the Black community. She meticulously curates her own image and that of her son, Junior, viewing a girl like Pecola, deemed "black and ugly," with utter contempt. When Junior maliciously kills the family cat and blames Pecola, Geraldine viciously attacks her: "You nasty little black bitch [7]. Get out of my house" (Morrison, 1994: 56). In this scene, Geraldine, a Black woman, perpetuates insult and oppression against Pecola based on the hierarchical order constructed by white aesthetics. This behavior illustrates the internalization and replication of gender oppression within the community; women not only suffer direct oppression from men but also perpetuate oppression amongst themselves by internalizing white standards, thereby intensifying gender inequality.

The violence Pecola endures is a direct imposition of patriarchal fetters. Her father, Cholly Breedlove, epitomizes male domination: he perpetrates domestic violence against his wife, Pauline, and, in a drunken state, sexually assaults his own daughter. Patriarchy, through the binary oppositions of "male/female" and "human/nature," constructs an oppressive system that simultaneously relegates women and nature to the status of the "Other," granting men absolute dominion over both:

> Cholly Breedlove, then, a renting black, having put his family outdoors, had catapulted himself beyond the reaches of human consideration. He had joined the animals; was, indeed, an old dog, a snake, a ratty nigger. Mrs. Breedlove was staying with the woman she worked for; the boy, Sammy, was with some other family; and Pecola was to stay with us. Cholly was in jail. (p.8~9)

Cholly Breedlove, as the Black male patriarch, embodies the extreme distortion of patriarchal power under racial oppression. Patriarchy ostensibly assigns men the role of "provider," but systemic racism denies Cholly access to legitimate resources to fulfill this role. Paradoxically, his "male authority" is not diminished but reinforced through the deprivation of his family's basic security: his wife Pauline is forced to live with her white employer, and his children become dependents in other households [8,9]. This "domination" extends from the economic sphere into the physical realm—leaving his family "outdoors" means exposing their bodies to the elements, rendering them unprotected and disposable. Cholly, meanwhile, completes his alienation from "human" to "non-human" by associating himself with "animals," an "old dog," a "snake," and a "rat." This alienation is both a product of patriarchal failure (his inability to fulfill the provider role) and a grotesque form of rebellion against it.

White mainstream culture consistently associates Blackness with terms like "dirty," "dangerous," and "inferior," providing the cultural template for Cholly's alienation. The repeated use of racial slurs in the novel reflects how white mainstream culture dehumanizes Black individuals by associating them with images of filth and danger, suggesting that they, like marginalized aspects of nature, are treated as disposable or unwelcome [10]. This metaphor parallels the material reality of the Black neighborhood—"deteriorating infrastructure" and "devalued land"—where racial segregation denies access to social resources, forcing the environment into a state resembling "natural wilderness." Cholly's act of putting his family "outdoors" further reinforces this equation of Blackness with natural waste. His family thus becomes an "ecological sacrifice" to the collusion of patriarchy and racism: Pauline, living with her white employer, must perform the role of the "submissive Black maid," her body subject to the dual domination of white power and Black male

power; the children, Sammy and Pecola, suffer profound psychological trauma from familial rupture, with Pecola's ultimate descent into madness over her obsession with blue eyes symbolizing the complete erasure of Black female subjectivity under this double oppression.

As Jin has argued, "the human aggression against nature is equivalent to male aggression against the female body." From an ecological perspective, the failure of the marigold seeds in the novel serves as a crucial entry point revealing the current state of human oppression of nature [11]. This ecological destruction leads to cultural and psychological distortion, progressively unveiling the cruelty and far-reaching impact of this oppression:

> I even think now that the land of the entire country was hostile to marigolds that year. This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers. Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live. We were wrong, of course, but it doesn't matter. It's too late. At least on the edge of my town, among the garbage and the sunflowers of my town, it's much, much, much too late. (p. 128)

Soil, the fundamental matrix of life, providing sustenance and support for plants, is an indispensable part of the natural ecological cycle. Yet, in the novel's depiction, the soil becomes an agent of death. This alienation of the soil is a consequence of humanity's predatory exploitation of nature during industrialization. While industrialization spurred rapid economic growth, it also brought overuse and pollution of the land. Emissions from factories, the abuse of pesticides and fertilizers, alter the soil's physical and chemical properties, depleting its fertility and introducing toxins. In such an environment, plants like marigolds struggle to survive, symbolizing the disruption of the natural ecological balance and the threat to biodiversity [12,13]. This predicament is not unique to the novel's Black community but reflects the broader ecological damage wrought by industrialization, exposing humanity's short-sighted pursuit of economic gain at the expense of nature's carrying capacity. The failure of the marigolds transcends a mere ecological event, carrying profound cultural significance. Within the novel, the marigolds symbolize the Black community's aspirations for a better life and affirmation of their own cultural value. The community's attempt to cultivate marigolds represents an effort to create a beautiful space of their own, but the hostility of the soil crushes this hope. This mirrors the racial oppression the community faces in society. White mainstream culture, through aesthetic standards and social structures, discriminates against and marginalizes Black people, denying them equal opportunities for development. The Black community, like plants in hostile soil, struggles to thrive. Concurrently, the oppression of nature resonates with the oppression of gender. The female characters, particularly Black women, endure physical and psychological wounds under the combined weight of patriarchy and racism [14]. They, like suppressed nature, are denied the right to grow freely. Natural oppression thus becomes a symbol of racial and gender oppression. Through this metaphor, Morrison reveals the intrinsic connections between these forms of oppression and their shared devastation of both the human spirit and the natural world.

3. Flickers and Echoes: Dual Resistance in the Realm of Silence

In the face of oppression, resistance persists. In *The Bluest Eye*, Black women and nature articulate their resistance through "silent" means—echoes that signify both defiance against oppression and the defense of the right to exist.

> I destroyed white baby dolls. But the dismembering of dolls was not the true horror. The truly horrifying thing was the transference of the same impulses to little white girls. The indifference with which I could have axed them was shaken only by my desire to do so. (p. 11)

The white-skinned doll is a concrete symbol of white cultural hegemony, embodying the Black community's fear of and submission to "white supremacy." The act of destroying

the doll, superficially a rejection of white aesthetics, is fundamentally an unconscious act of rebellion by a Black girl against her oppressors after enduring prolonged suppression. While not directly targeting men, this resistance indirectly challenges the racially oppressive system that men often directly enforce [15]. Claudia MacTeer's destruction of the white dolls represents a powerful form of confrontation with racial and gender hegemony. Claudia describes receiving such a doll: "Here," they said, "this is beautiful, and if you are on this day 'worthy' you may have it" (p.10). The blue-eyed doll incarnates the white aesthetic standard; its "prettiness" is defined as the goal Black girls must pursue. The adults' admiration—"isn't it pretty?"—is not mere appreciation but a disciplinary tactic, using the material reward ("if you are 'good' today") to internalize white aesthetics as the community's value system. This reflects the imposition of stereotypical gender roles; within the Black community, girls are expected to be docile and obedient, conforming to the male-dominated family structure. The doll's reward mechanism fuses this gender discipline with racial discrimination: Black girls must conform to gender norms and accept white beauty standards to gain approval. This seduction amounts to cultural colonization, disguising the poison of racism behind the appeal of 'prettiness,' and forcing Black women to internalize a white-defined beauty standard that negates their natural Black features—dark skin and eyes [16]. Claudia's act is far from childish mischief; it is a rejection of the white aesthetic standard. The "beauty" symbolized by the white doll is the very fetter oppressing Pecola. Tearing the doll apart is a declaration by Black girls refusing to have their worth defined by whiteness. Though seemingly small, this act of defiance is like a stone cast into stagnant water, shattering the carefully maintained illusion of patriarchal "compliance."

> Not even the gardens fronting the lake showed marigolds that year. But so deeply concerned were we with the health and safe delivery of Pecola's baby we could think of nothing but our own magic: if we planted the seeds, and said the right words over them, they would blossom, and everything would be all right. (p. 2)

The children attribute the failure of the marigolds to sprout to Pecola's incestuous pregnancy—an association that reflects their attempt to make sense of trauma through symbolic thinking. The growth of marigolds follows natural laws, unrelated to human societal morality. However, through the children's naive misattribution, the novel forces a natural phenomenon into a human ethical framework, suggesting humanity's persistent tendency to interpret nature through its own narrow values, overlooking nature's independence and capacity for resistance [17]. The barren soil signifies the loss of fertility caused by industrialization and racial oppression. Nature, by refusing to yield, protests against humanity's predatory ecological exploitation and the racism that designates the Black community as "wasteland." Nature's "resistance" manifests more subtly—through land infertility and ecological degradation, essentially an ecological response to human plunder. The marigolds' failure to sprout shatters the illusion of human control over natural life; it is nature's warning against the exploitative, patriarchal mode of production: when nature is treated as a "resource to be dominated at will," akin to women being treated as "objects to be abused at will," nature will ultimately undermine that domination through its own inherent laws. The failure of the marigolds coincides with Pecola's psychological collapse; both are victims of systematic oppression. Pecola is consumed by society due to her obsession with blue eyes; the marigolds cannot grow due to soil pollution. Nature and humanity alike exhibit a state of "withering" under oppression.

4. Roots and Symbiosis: Deep Resonance in the Essence of Being

The conceptual basis for the domination and oppression of both nature and women in patriarchal society is identical: value dualism. Within the interstice of oppression and resistance, the "symbiosis" between women and nature emerges as a potential path to-

wards spiritual redemption. This symbiosis is not mere similarity but a deep interconnection, akin to roots entwining in soil, concentrated in *The Bluest Eye* in the resonant fates of Pecola and the marigolds. After being raped and impregnated, Pecola invests all her hopes in the growth of the marigolds. Here, the marigolds transcend their status as ordinary plants, becoming a 'mirror' of Pecola's inner world—both exist in a state of neglect and violation, yet both cling stubbornly to the instinct for 'growth' in their despair [18]. "Frieda and I—after the baby came too soon and died. After the gossip and the slow wagging of heads. " (p. 126). When the marigolds ultimately wither, Pecola's fetus dies. This synchronicity is not coincidental but reflects the synchrony of female and natural life rhythms central to ecofeminism.

> She thought they were pretty. But grown-ups say, “Miss Dunion keeps her yard so nice. Not a dandelion anywhere.” Women wearing traditional black headscarves go into the fields with baskets to pull them up. They do not want the yellow heads—only the jagged leaves, which they use to make dandelion soup and wine. Nobody loves the head of a dandelion, perhaps because they are so many, strong, and fleeting.
>
> She owned the clumps of dandelions whose white heads, last fall, she had blown away; whose yellow heads, this fall, she peered into. And owning them made her part of the world, and the world a part of her. (p. 28)

Pecola initially finds beauty in dandelions, seeing them as akin to herself. However, others in the community view them as weeds, useful only for soup or wine. The dandelions symbolize the Black girl's innocent affinity for nature and her subsequent identity crisis under the assault of white culture. Pecola's identification with the dandelion suggests her desire to retain the innocence nature bestowed, while society relegates her to the status of a "weed"—lowly and undesirable. This imagery contrasts with the marigolds: the marigolds' failure symbolizes the struggle for survival under racism, while the dandelions' trampling signifies the struggle for cultural self-acceptance. Morrison implies that Black women need to reconnect with nature and their own cultural traditions to resist psychological enslavement [19].

Furthermore, the novel's imagery of the "storm" also carries connotations of symbiosis. As the storm approaches, "Clouds... like crumpled black cloth, yet showing silver edges where the lightning hid. The raging storm does not harm her; instead, it becomes a vessel for releasing her pain. Nature's "fury" and the woman's "trauma" find mutual acceptance in this moment, forming a kind of "symbiosis born of brokenness." This connection suggests that the resonance between women and nature might indeed be the starting point for dismantling dualistic hierarchies and reconstructing a viable order of existence.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper offers an ecofeminist reading of Toni Morrison's classic *The Bluest Eye*. By analyzing the connections between the fates of Black women and the novel's natural imagery, it reveals the deep interrelations of racial, gendered, and ecological oppression within patriarchal society. First, Pecola's tragedy, alongside the withering marigolds and barren land, reflects the "double oppression" endured by Black women and nature. Second, acts like Claudia MacTeer's rebellion and the land's retaliatory infertility demonstrate the possibility of "resistance." Finally, the spiritual bond between Pecola and the marigolds points towards "symbiosis" as a potential path to redemption. The interconnection between women and nature allows them to draw strength from the natural world in their struggle against oppression, fostering self-affirmation and cultural belonging. This analysis not only enriches textual interpretation of the novel but also provides new perspectives for addressing contemporary issues of gender and ecology.

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