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NATURAL WORLD AND AFRICAN AMERICAN IDENTITY: AN ENVIRONMENTALIST APPROACH TO JEAN TOOMER'S *CANE* AND TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED*

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Abstract:

*Moving beyond the study of the physical environment in literature, eco-criticism has evolved to explore the issues of societal constructs such as race, class, gender and even colonialism. The focus has been on the relationship between humans and the environment; however, it is not limited to it. The natural world has been identified not merely as the aesthetic background, but an active element that paves the path for determining the identity of human characters as well. This is truly reflected in the writings of indigenous origins and also in that of African American. African American literature stands a true testimony of the struggle for identity and its revelation in the natural environment. This paper examines the canonical texts *Cane* by Jean Toomer and *Beloved* by Toni Morrison to address the crisis of identity, both for the characters as well as the natural world. It raises questions such as the shift in the ecological niche by classifying humans as Blacks and Whites, at the same time addresses the issues of environmental justice which has been denied by the discriminatory laws of the supremacists and comments on the basic human-nature relationship portrayed in the texts. The destructive approach of the colonial capitalist society became the harbinger of the global environmental crisis, destroying multiple human societies and their natural world.*

Keywords: *Eco-criticism, African American literature, Identity, Colonial Capitalism, Ecological niche, Environmental Justice, Racism, etc.*

Human society has always found solace in the lap of nature, especially the indigenous communities that share a close relationship with the environment. African Americans share the same co-dependent ideals of moving in the ecosphere, carried through their African heritage. This interdependence has extended beyond the capitalist regime of exploitation and slavery, and continues to be a source of serenity for the African American community. The ability to interact and grow within one's ecosystem while allowing each and every being with an opportunity to flourish is intrinsically woven in them, environmentalism being the warp and woof of their cultural and societal construct. Jean Toomer, in the seminal text, *Cane* celebrates this legacy and Toni Morrison brings out the ethos of this natural association in her, *Beloved*. Environmentalism, as a study, takes into account various attributes of the natural ecosystem and its preservation, including the wellbeing of human society. This extends its



horizons beyond the concept of preserving wilderness, enabling it to meditate on human hazards including those based on race, class and gender. It traces the deterioration and endangerment occurring throughout the biosphere and endeavours to bring to the forefront ideas, themes as well as challenges through the medium of art and literature. By proposing an ecocritical study of art and literature, Eco critics have tried to create consciousness regarding the significance of the natural environment, prevalent issues and effective measures to curb them. 'Ecocriticism', Pramod K Nayar says, "focuses on the link between literature and nature" and emphasises "on a practice of reading that pays attention to social inequalities as linked to gender oppression and environmental exploitation", which allows an activist outlook to the theory (Nayar, 344).

Cane is a literary masterpiece, in the sense that it manifests, juxtaposes and acknowledges the idyllic and the civic. It proposes a study of numerous characters and brings out their essence in the natural world, creating an ecosystem of its own. At the same time, it stimulates the imagery of oppressive treatment and brutal exploitation taking place amongst the same species. Morrison's *Beloved* carries the same stimulation; by creating an understanding of racial abuse and enslavement the novel brings forth the degeneration of natural ties and ensuing disasters. It becomes crucial for the characters to break away from the societal constructs and re-establish themselves in the natural world to be able to identify their own selves.

Impact of the Colonial Capitalism:

Environmental crisis on a global level, somehow, finds its roots in rapid industrialization that blanketed the globe with the expansion of colonial capitalist powers. Lawrence Wood opines, "The strain of the sheer geographic expanse of global imperialism on the resources of the colonizer, meant that long term environmental impacts (often like the concern for the wellbeing of the indigenous populations) were pushed to the sides in an attempt to make profit out of the very expensive enterprise of controlling a significantly-sized colony" (Wood, 5).

Exploitation of natural resources was accompanied with the exploitation of human resources. Mass deforestation for cultivable lands and resource extraction for industrial imperials disrupted entire ecosystems and brought a whole race of humanity under the system of enslavement, thereby denying them the freedom that was natural. Racism and Slavery – two of the many facets of capitalisation brought by the colonial invaders- imposed 'Black' and 'slave' as the identity of a substantial portion of human race. This identity and inferior status was given based on the colour of their skin and the ability to control them through the means of invasion and brutality, all life choices were taken away, millions were forced to leave their homeland and lead a life in captivity and cruelty.

Cane and *Beloved* lend voice to the plight of the "slaves" and traces the disaster that occurred in their physical, psychological and social world. Sethe, in *Beloved*, has a recollection of a narration of her mother's abduction, ceaseless sexual and physical assault on the sea and the land, the burnt identity mark of circle and cross designating her as a slave- this was the life story of thousands of people. People who were forced to migrate across the ocean to begin a life of servitude and confinement, where they were nothing more than a physical entity to carry out the labours and fulfil the whims of their White masters. *Cane* resonates with the past of African Americans lodged in slavery and finds voice in the songs of the peasants and mill workers. "Reapers", "Cotton Song", "Song of the Son", "Harvest Song" carry the pain and fear of the field workers, the monotony of their existence and a deep craving for freedom in addition to the fact that slavery has become an intrinsic part of their identity-

In time, for though the sun is setting on
A song-lit race of slaves, it has not set
(Song of The Son, *Cane*) (Toomer, 15).



The texts carry with them numerous faceless images of slaves who were bound in chains, beaten, chased by hunting dogs, lynched, hanged or burned. Paul D in *Beloved* comes across many slaves on the run that recall horrifying instances and shudder at the fate of their race. Lynching and burning of Tom Burnwell in *Blood Burning Moon* or the image in *Portrait in Georgia*, concede with the fact that for the capitalists the coloured people were nothing more than dispensable commodity, to be bought and sold at convenience. Baby Suggs loses nine children to this practice with no idea of where or how they fare, her bondage papers address her as Jenny Whitlow, a name she was never called. Sethe tries to behead her own children rather than see them lead a life as slaves. All these become testament to the loss of basic humanitarian values where greed and power dominated and man refused to see his fellow mankind as beyond the instrument of his usage. Arlene Joan Crewdson believes this denial of “the very humanity of the black man” by the American White was “an attempt to appease his conscience” from the brutality of the actions (Crewdson, 4).

Shift in Ecological niche and Social Constructs:

Ecological niche refers to the role and space an organism takes in its natural habitat. Jitka Polechová and David Storch in their paper, *Ecological niche* say that it includes both “the effects the environment has on a species” and “the effects a species has on the environment” (Polechova, 3). “The niches of distinct, even closely related, species tend to differ in at least some aspects” (Polechova, 2) and while ecological niches are not permanent and shifts can be observed, they usually apply to species as a whole. The stark shift that occurred among humans with the phenomenon of Racism cannot be considered natural. It created a hierarchy within the human species, classifying the anthropocentric White as the superior, cultured human race and the ecocentric coloured as the uncivilised beasts. According to Murray Bookchin, pioneer of social ecology, these social hierarchies and “the control and power exercised by humans over other humans through age, sex, politics, religions and ‘epistemologies of rule’ have led to the demise of organic societies and the rise of vexing ecological predicaments” (Macaulay, 1). The implication of European social constructs led to a drift from the indigenous practices embedded in the environmental constructs, thereby establishing a human world severed from the natural world. Cultural practices unique to the Pan-African communities were lost and Colonial practices were considered beyond them. Dehumanisation of coloured people was normalised by nonconformity to European trends. When writing about colonial beliefs regarding nature, Pramod K Nayar says “Natives in the colonies were seen as a part of nature: savage, primitive, meant to be improved by European influence” (Nayar, 333). They were identified as beasts, cannibals, dim wit workhorses, imbecile watch dogs, etc. Morrison captured the essence of it when she wrote, “they were trespassers among the human race.” (Morrison, 148) Sethe’s encounter with the schoolteacher and the nephews “milking” her is so appalling that it leaves Halle without any sense of reason or reality, to be always haunted by the heart wrenching image. While Baby Suggs is grateful that Garners didn’t treat their slaves as breeding mares and studs to be rented out, Paul D speculates on the extent of robbing off of human identity when, with an iron bit in mouth and hands in shackles, he comes across Mister, a rooster- “Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I wasn’t allowed to be and stay what I was...I was something else and that something was less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub” (Morrison, 86).

Procreation between organisms of the same species is natural but the demarcation between Black and White, led to suppression of natural emotions of loving companionship and sexual attraction. *Cane’s Theatre*, *Box Seat* and *Bona and Paul* have characters fighting their true feelings because of a deep rooted fear of being different and inferior. Becky’s miscegenation leaves her on the fringes of human society, an invisible entity. Her sons are, to borrow the adage from Trevor Noah, *Born a crime* and are left as social outcasts with no hope of acceptance from either side, emphasizing



an identity crisis faced by mixed race people. Similarly, Sethe's request for a marriage ceremony is mocked, as slaves were considered below the norms of societal acceptance. The hierarchy seeped even to religious practices, where native African sacred beliefs were taken over by Christianity.

Toomer particularly emphasises it in 'Conversion', with traces in 'Carma', 'Georgia Dusk' and 'Kabnis'. The traditional high-priests, witch-doctors, juju-man were getting lost while the church was under White man's control, further denying them any spiritual affiliation.

Human Nature Relationship:

In an ecosystem, all beings live with a mutual interdependence, a symbiotic existence, and humans are no exception. This is essential for survival as man has to exist within the biosphere and the relationship here exceeds the physical boundaries and proceeds to mental, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. To conceive of a separate existence can only lead to disaster, an 'eco-crisis', resulting from what environmental activist Vandana Shiva calls, 'Eco-apartheid'. The colonial forces tried to establish a human centric environment wherein the natural world had no independent value beyond its usage to man. It was the indigenous communities that kept true to the meaning of symbiotic existence and tried to lead a life in communion with laws of nature, practising the concept of what the western world later termed 'deep ecology'. African Americans found their true identity in the natural world, one that was free of White prejudice, colonial notions and racial barbarity. Their relationship with their natural surroundings became crucial for recognising their individual existence and their role in the larger environment. In accordance with Anissa Janine Wardi's view, "In Toomer's able hands, the reader readily grasps the composition in which human and more than human life are not bifurcated but part of a larger ecosystem of interaction and transformation" (Wardi, 32), Cane's female characters, such as in 'Karintha', 'Esther', 'Evening Song', 'Face' etc. are resplendent in natural imagery which establishes them in a wider world view, by giving them an innate strength to assert their presence. They are individual parts of a much larger universe that extends beyond the conventions of human society. They represent our connection to the environment and our need to feel that connection. The American South while shrouded in its past of slavery is still beautiful in its natural abundance and gives a sense of belonging to the African Americans as it is intrinsic to their history, culture and identity. While the Northern cities are free from slavery, they still install a sense of alienation and entrapment, where the soul hungers for the vast countryside, open fields, easy camaraderie and companionship of the Georgian landscape ("Beehive", "Avey", "Calling Jesus", "Prayer" etc.) Toomer adheres to the kinship between the American Southern topography and the Black lives that goes beyond the confines of slavery - "Cane denounces human exceptionalism and recovers nature, but this is not the sanitized, Western, passive construction of nature from which people of colour have suffered and generally been excluded. Cane's nature is vibrant, unpredictable, varied, inclusive, and other" (Taylor-Wiseman).

Morrison's characters from *Beloved* have their own interactions with the natural world and that's what humanises them, makes them realise that they are more than slaves or beasts. This influence allows them to stand for what they truly are- rational human beings, who feel, think and hope for a better future, in adherence to the concept of "ecological consciousness". "Morrison's work determines her belief in the interconnectedness of nature, religion and African American identity" and "offer hope for creating a better future" that is beyond the reach of racial prejudice and segregation" (Beaulieu, 12) It is in the forest clearing, amidst the trees, that Baby Suggs inspires numerous people to love and embrace themselves, to sing and dance, to laugh and cry, to rejoice in their human relations- mother and her children, man and his wife, and to imagine a beautiful happy life- "in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it



hard” (Morrison, 103). The “chokecherry tree” on Sethe’s back, incarnates her realisation and struggle to create a free life for herself and her children. River Ohio, the “emerald closet”, the tree- “Brother”, rain, flowering trees are all safe havens for Sethe, Denver and Paul D and ultimately the means of creating a better existence for themselves.

Environmental Justice and African American Community:

Environmental Justice is defined by USEPA as “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, colour, national origin, or income, with respect to the development, implementation and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies”. (USEPA) This allows Eco critics to bring into fold communities adversely affected by the environmental degeneration caused by the capitalist regime. It evaluates the devastation caused to human society and thereby addresses the exploitative dehumanising practices of Racism and Slavery. Human beings are an integral part of the biosphere, therefore, it is necessary to consider the atrocities levied on them if one truly wants to delve into the natural world and the hazards it faces. It is the right of each and every organism to survive freely in their respective ecosystems and defend it from annihilatory forces. African Americans have been fighting against the racist practices that led to the destruction of their lands, cultures, communities, identities and overall ecosphere, even before the Environmental Justice Movement came into being and their literature attests to this. Ecocritics with the principles of environmental ethics allow them to “replace(s) intolerant and discriminatory ideological constructs about history and civilization with a wider and more inclusive conceptual frame” (Lovino, 37).

Cane and *Beloved* create an understanding of the destruction that African Americans and native groups had to undergo. They were removed from their natural homes- the lands which had nourished them for centuries. These lands were pillaged through, its natural wealth crushed to fill out colonial pockets. The annihilation went beyond the realm of physical environment and was rooted in the systematic breakdown of individual and communal psyche. Bonnes has inferred from Roger Barker’s Ecological Psychology, “the setting conditions maintain human actions and that a substantial change in these conditions alters not only behavior but also inhabitants’ psychological systems” (Bonnes, 4). Extortion of identities, lifestyles, basic rights and overall dehumanisation of African Americans is brought to light in Toomer’s and Morrison’s writings. The books reflect the link between environmental degradation and racial conflict by emphasising the role of White society in propagating the anthropocentric views and their scornful and slanderous attitude towards the ecological consciousness of indigenous societies. Furthermore, according to Raymond Williams, “In Western thought and literature, one of the oldest binaries has been nature versus culture” (Nayar, 340) which observes an ideological overlap with Black versus White, wherein the White society becomes one with the European concept of cultural civilisation and Black society represents the wild nature.

However, when we study *Beloved* and *Cane* the question of civil behaviour and animalistic cruelty being representative of which race becomes apparent. Black characters never put anyone in chains, seal mouths with iron bits, sexually assault, physically damage or brutally murder. They don’t tear down families and communities. They endure all these atrocities and still are true representatives of the natural world because they feel compassion and kindness for all living beings. They befriend trees, love doves, have conversations with their environment and visualise themselves as a part of the said environment. These characters rise up from the ashes of their suffering and stand up for their own selves and their communities, continuing to believe in the goodness of mankind. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. expressed in his Noble acceptance speech, “I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality... I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word” (Martin, 1).



To conclude, *Cane* and *Beloved* are treasures of American literature that established the creative geniuses of their respective authors. The books are an amalgamation of something ugly and beautiful. The Jim Crow laws were the definition of inhuman behaviour and yet they bereft the African Americans of their human identity. In spite of that there is a beauty in the journeys of self-awareness that the characters undergo. This journey however is not theirs alone, with them are the trees, rivers, fields, rocks, doves, rats, dogs, moon, sunlight, dusk, mist, snow, cotton flowers, pines and canes. The environment is a constant companion that protects, inspires and heals, restoring to them their true identities. This principle is the basis of ecotherapy as “ecopsychology emphasizes positive emotions such as caring, connectedness and the healing powers of contact with nature” (Charles, 4). *Cane* emphasises that humans are a part of the natural world, they grow and flourish in it and for all the societal and capitalist notions, and they ultimately circle back to it. The soul is in the soil and soil is in the soul. Toomer pays homage to the ancestry that is rooted in slavery, the heritage of survival and the value of simple rustic life. These ties are the foundation of African American identity; however each individual has his/her own story that shapes their individual identity. *Beloved* brings us to the heart of slave tradition in America and forces us to contemplate the horrors that were the lives of coloured people. Where the notion for freedom is entitled to the ability to love and desire painlessly, whether it be the tiniest grass blade, a dove, the moon, a woman, a child, a brother. For “Separation of humans from nature is viewed as responsible for environmental destruction as well as people's alienation and sense of incompleteness” (Charles, 5). Morrison establishes that human beings have a profound relationship with their environment, one that is deep rooted and instinctual and is crucial for the resurrection of broken and lost spirits. Environmentalist approach to these seminal texts allows a contemplation of the fact that human lives are a part of nature and have to be taken into account in response to environmental degradation. Ecocritics believe that “a reunion between humanity and nature will restore concreteness and values to a natural world in which we can once more feel thoroughly at home, in consonance and reciprocity with all living things.” (Abrams 100) For a healthy and prosperous environment humans have to have a healthy and nurturing relationship within themselves and the natural world. The practices of indigenous communities have to be preserved and respected, along with the ideas of a bio centric existence wherein all the organisms retain their natural rights of surviving in their ecosystems, of being one with the environment. Langston Hughes affirms to the belief of Black identity being unanimous with nature in his poem *The Negro Speaks of Rivers*:

I've known rivers:

I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the river (Hughes, 11-3).

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