

Objects of Oppression: An Ecofeminist Reading of Tar Baby by Toni Morrison

Baskı Objeleri: Toni Morrison'ın Katran Bebek Adlı Romanının Ekofeminist Bir Okuması

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Abstract

Formulated in the twentieth century, ecofeminism is a body of literature that seeks to identify the relationship between the oppression of nature and women. In this context, the traditional roles of nature and women have been examined in various social fields, such as literature, philosophy, sociology, and psychology. Although its historical roots go back to the 1970s, this approach gained wider recognition in the 1990s, with current developments in different fields. As the theoretical background of this study, ecofeminism clarifies the conceptual links, especially in patriarchal societies, between nature and women, in terms of domination, oppression, colonialism, sexism, and racism. This study attempts to analyze Toni Morrison's novel Tar Baby (1981) by applying principles and considerations of ecofeminism through male/female and human/non-human dichotomies. As a writer who is concerned with all varieties of domination, Morrison, in Tar Baby, foregrounds the exploitation of nature to raise ecological awareness and wisdom, and to mark the fragmentation, displacement, and assimilation of women in a male-dominated world. This study confirms that there is a strong link between the oppression of nature and the oppression of women in male-dominated societies.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, Oppression, Toni Morrison, Tar Baby.

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Öz

Yirminci yüzyılda formüle edilen ekofeminizm, doğanın ve kadınların ezilmesi arasındaki ilişkiyi tanımlamaya çalışan bir literatür bütünüdür. Bu bağlamda, doğanın ve kadının geleneksel rolleri edebiyat, felsefe, sosyoloji ve psikoloji gibi farklı sosyal alanlarda incelenmiştir. Tarihsel kökleri 1970'lere kadar uzansa da bu yaklaşım 1990'larda farklı alanlardaki güncel gelişmelerle birlikte geniş bir tanınırlık kazanmıştır. Bu çalışmanın kuramsal arka planını oluşturan ekofeminizm, özellikle ataerkillik toplumlarda doğa ve kadın arasındaki tahakküm, sömürgecilik, cinsiyetçilik ve ırkçılık gibi kavramsal bağlara açıklık getirmektedir. Bu çalışma, Toni Morrison'ın Katran Bebek (1981) romanını, ekofeminizmin ilke ve düşüncelerini erkek/kadın ve insan/insan olmayan dikotomilerine bağlı olarak analiz etmeye çalışmaktadır. Tüm tahakküm biçimlerini ele alan bir yazar olan Morrison, Katran Bebek'te ekolojik farkındalık ve bilgeliliği artırmak için doğanın sömürüldüğünü ilan ederken, erkek egemen bir dünyada kadınların parçalanması, yerinden edilmesi ve asimilasyonuna da işaret etmektedir. Bu çalışma, erkek egemen toplumlarda doğanın sömürülmesi ile kadınların ezilmesi arasında güçlü bir bağ olduğunu doğrulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ekoeleştiri, Ekofeminizm, Baskı, Toni Morrison, Katran Bebek.

Extended Summary

Since the 1950s, the worsening ecological crisis has been one of the most debated issues in the modern world. Climate change, pollution, global warming, and deforestation are some of the main causes of this continuous deterioration, which alerted activists, environmentalists, and ecocritics to take precautions to help rebuild ecosystems in the late sixties and the early seventies. Ecocentric consciousness flourished in the twentieth century as people became aware of the interconnectedness of the human and non-human worlds. This critical position of the ecosystem attracted the attention of writers who sought to highlight the anthropocentric attitude embedded in humanism towards nature. Ecocriticism, in this sense, “has one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman” (Glotfelty, 1996: xix). Glotfelty’s definition underlines the interdisciplinary aspect of ecocriticism, which requires interconnected knowledge of literature and other wide array of social and natural sciences.

In the 1970s, ecofeminism emerged as a “body of literature whose theme is the link between the domination of the women and the domination of nature” (Plumwood, 1986: 120). This movement, in which gender-based discrimination and environmental exploitation are intertwined and rooted in patriarchal systems of power and control, was supported by writers and found meaningful in the representation of oppressed groups in literary works. The manipulation of nature and women through the development in science and technology has become the subject of literary works to illustrate the environmental degradation and gender inequality, as both are by products of a profit-driven economy that exploits both nature and marginalized communities. Thus, ecofeminism places great importance on interconnectedness, highlighting that all humans are an integral part of the natural world, an idea closely tied to spirituality. Within this framework, for most ecofeminists, nature is not merely a source of sustenance but also a spiritual force, with women sharing a unique connection to this spirituality. Toni Morrison, among others, champions this belief in the spiritual essence of nature and the profound bond between women and the environment. In a similar vein, Plumwood underscores how the subjugation of both women and nature represents a central theme in ecofeminist discourse, serving as a comprehensive framework for the oppression of various marginalized groups, including slaves, people of color, laborers, and indigenous populations (Plumwood, 1993). In parallel with Plumwood’s remarks, Morrison attempts to signify the marginalization of black women and nature in white male-dominated societies, emphasizing their resilience in seeking sustenance from the natural world despite the oppressive forces they confront. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to examine Toni Morrison’s novel *Tar Baby* from an ecofeminist perspective in order to recognize and confront the intertwined issues of gender oppression and environmental degradation, leading to more profound injustices for marginalized groups, especially women of color. In the novel, Morrison weaves together themes of cultural heritage, racial tensions, exploitation of nature, creating a narrative that challenges societal norms in a deeply divided world. The author, who perceives alienation from nature as a departure from one’s cultural roots, portrays the yearning of white male-dominated societies to exert control over both, with the ensuing repercussions illustrated through the main character, Jadine.

One can argue that the convergence of a nature-oriented approach and interdisciplinary studies, named as ecocriticism, serves as a means to express wisdom and ecological awareness. Through these studies, this article recovers the overlooked connection between the self and the environment in literary discourse. Thus, in the first part of this study, theoretical considerations,

ecocriticism and ecofeminism are presented to clarify the research method. Within the emerging capitalist world order, marked by the dominance of white males, the intrinsic value of women and nature is commodified, and the transformation of these formerly sacred concepts into instruments of oppression becomes a focal point in the novel. Hence, the section focusing on “Ecofeminism in *Tar Baby*” delves into the exploration of the connection between the concerns of ecofeminism and the novel by analyzing the characters within it.

In conclusion, this paper confirms that the parallel domination of women and nature in Morrison’s novel *Tar Baby* leads to consequences such as isolation, distancing from cultural roots, and the search for the self.

Ecocriticism

First coined by William Rueckert in 1978, ecocriticism reveals the connection between nature and literature from an earth-centered perspective. In her article, “Ecocriticism: Natural World in the Literary Viewfinder,” Oppermann states that “ecocriticism actually launches a call to literature to connect to the issues of today’s environmental crisis” (1999: 30). As Oppermann reiterates, the ecocritical approach is not just a scientific inquiry, but a demand and a manifestation to highlight the importance of the ecosystem.

In the twentieth century, literary critics such as Cheryll Glotfelty, Harold Fromm, William Rueckert, William Howarth, Neil Evernden wrote essays to enrich ecocritical consciousness, and these selected essays were collected in a book entitled *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996). This anthology offers a “holistic approach as against men’s anthropocentric arrogance in the twentieth century” (Dash, 2019: 160). All human-induced changes, mostly negative and destructive to nature, have changed the historical direction of the human-nature relationship. In his essay, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” White explains this drastic change: “Formerly man had been part of nature; now he was the exploiter of nature” (1996: 8). This exploitative attitude, White argues, has led to the loss of spiritual beliefs and long-standing traditions of human substitution for nature. In this sense, the oppression of nature and women in male-dominated societies marks a different and more visionary perspective that expands the boundaries of ecocriticism.

2. Ecofeminism

Val Plumwood, one of the leading figures of ecofeminism, marks the emergence of ecofeminism as “the last decade has seen the appearance of a body of literature whose theme is the link between the domination of women and the domination of nature. This has been labeled ‘ecofeminism’” (1986: 120). Critics have examined the parallels between nature and women in the context of their representation in literary works. On this basis, ecofeminism explores the link between women and nature by offering the historical and cultural roots of these two categories. Plumwood points out this link: “The traditional role of both women and nature has been conceived as an instrumental one. Both have been valued either entirely or mainly in terms of their usefulness to others who are taken as valuable in and for themselves” (1986: 120). Sherry Ortner, an American anthropologist, exposes this sameness: “Every culture has identified women with a symbol that demeans or undervalues them. There is only one symbol that fits this description, and that is ‘nature’ in general” (1974:72) to indicate that nature, like women, is *other*. These oppressions and devaluations have their origins in the materialistic worldview, which can be traced through the

Enlightenment to the present. The negative valuation of women and nature, by disregarding their spirituality, intensifies the relationship between women and nature. Apart from the hostility of patriarchy towards women and nature, there is another parallel between these two disadvantaged groups. The connection between women and nature is most visibly seen in their capacity for reproduction. This capacity, which held been sacred and attached with utmost value in the past, has now become the source of their inferiority in the Western thought, which prioritizes the superiority of the intellect and spirit over bodily functions. The reproductive cycle of women and nature could be seen as a denial of the spirit and a focus on their physical existence. In ecofeminist discourse, these polarities are critically foregrounded as the underlying structures of oppression. As Jackson puts it: “For ecofeminists, life is an interconnected web, not a hierarchy. Thus human life has no greater value than non-human life and forms of nature are not of differential value” (1993: 397). As Jackson claims, ecofeminist theory has grown out of an awareness that conceptualizes the possible problems of oppressed groups, such as women and the non-human world, and evaluates the link between the anthropocentric view of humanism and the traditional values of societies.

Historically, cultural parameters, combined with time, influence the perception and representation of women and nature in patriarchal societies. The appearance of nature in male-dominated societies, usually as an exploitable resource for human consumption, is closer to the representation of women being exploited by the hegemonic masculinity. Greta Gaard uncovers the reason for this as “the feminized status of women, animals, nature, and feminized others have been conceived of as separate and inferior in order to legitimate their subordination under an elite and often violent and militarized male-dominant social order” (2011: 28). Reclaiming common concerns of the ecofeminist approach in these lines, Gaard echoes the historical and social evidence supporting the assertion that “the domination of women and of nature has shared roots” (2011: 28). However, as Jackson explains in the quote below, ecofeminist literature challenges and subverts this representation: “The superiority of the feminine is an explicit theme in ecofeminist literature, with women seen as spiritual and intuitive in opposition to patriarchal and rational men” (1993: 397). In ecofeminist discourse, therefore, women’s spirituality is prioritized, and this quality is placed above men’s rationality.

To foreground the marginalization of nature and women, ecocritics and many theorists reframe the lines of ecofeminism through the lens of interdisciplinary studies and cross-cultural approaches. To advance this praxis, it is proposed to interrogate the link between the capitalist, anthropocentric New World and the alienation of humans from nature. Simon Estok observes that the “commodification of nature and of sexual minorities means othering difference and space” (2009: 214). However, as Gaard echoes, “ecofeminists strive to evolve structures that respect difference without universalizing” (2010: 656). Estok and Gaard’s views share a commitment prioritizing an earth-based spirituality over materialistic tendencies, making it a central focus of ecofeminist approaches to reconceptualize the connection between women and nature in literary works. This, in turn, enables an examination of the anthropocentric treatment prevalent in male-dominated societies.

3. Ecofeminism in *Tar Baby*

The ecological degradation during the twentieth century has garnered significant attention and concern within academic literary discourse. Numerous authors have drawn inspiration from ecological themes to create their literary works. Toni Morrison is among these writers, addressing not only environmental degradation but also the marginalization of nonwhite racial groups while en-

deavoring to delineate the division between the human and non-human realms. It is difficult to label Morrison's works as overtly ecofeminist or even ecocritically conceived since "she rejects any -ism, feeling that it diminishes her work or even dismisses it" (Kouassi, 2018: 5207). Nonetheless, one could plausibly contend that her novels implicitly engage with environmental concerns, encompassing topics such as the subjugation of nature, deforestation, and human dominance over the natural world. Hailed as a powerful African American writer of the 21st century, Morrison has "insights into the complexity, anxiety, and angst of the black community is intertwined to environmental consciousness, environmental racism, and the questions of race, identity, home, memory, and black culture" (Dash, 2019: 160-161). As Dash contends, her repertoire in terms of themes is vast and comprehensive, and, in doing so, she demonstrates the interrelationship between social forces and nature. Dash also refers to "her belief in the interconnectedness of nature, religion, and African American identity," (2019:161) which qualifies her as a prominent figure in ecocritical studies. Her endeavor to portray the oppression of nature aims to raise ecological consciousness that can influence readers' lives significantly. In essence, this study's primary objective is to illuminate Morrison's pursuit of ecological wisdom in her fiction, wherein she not only explores socio-historical dimensions but also attempts to highlight the exploitation of the natural world.

Written in 1981, *Tar Baby* is set in the Caribbean that diverges from the typical social settings found in Morrison's other novels. The novel explores the opulence and affluence of the upper class, displaying their impulsive greed and the consequential destruction of the natural world in their relentless pursuit of personal desires. Valerian Street, a white landowner, owns L'Arbe de la Croix, an estate that is a symbol of Valerian's wealth. In this narrative, he symbolizes the dominance of white man over the wild nature and his relationship with the environment on Isle des Chevaliers serves as a commentary on the broader themes of power, control, and exploitation. His arrogant domination begins with his desire to build a summer house in the Caribbean in order to live an isolated life after retirement. It is at this point that his hegemonic attitude towards the island's ecosystem emerges, and from this point on, there are various scenes of natural destruction attesting to his greed and hegemony. Valerian and his wife Margaret live with Sydney and Ondine Childs, African-American slaves who have long served the Streets. They have no biological children, but their niece Jadine is being raised and educated with the financial support of Valerian Street. Initially, their relationship seems to transcend the conventional roles of master and servant. Jadine, the central character in this narrative, is nurtured and educated with a lifestyle akin to that of a white girl, courtesy of the Street family whose avarice and power contributing to the degradation of the island's natural habitat. Thus, Valerian, as a white male, establishes his domination over both nature and women and causes the natural balance to deteriorate. To indicate this suppression of nature, Morrison defines the state of the river at the beginning of the novel as evidence of man's domination:

The men had already folded the earth where there had been no fold and hollowed her where they had been no hollow, which explains what happened to the river. It crested, then lost its course, and finally its head. Evicted from the place where it had lived, and forced into unknown turf, it could not form its pools or waterfalls, and ran every which way (Morrison, 1981: 9).¹

This distortion of the river, as in the quote, both literally and metaphorically symbolizes the hegemonic treatment of the environment by the island's new inhabitants. Another quotation within

¹ From now on, only page numbers will be given for the citations from *Tar Baby* (1981).

the narrative, demonstrating the disruption of the natural equilibrium by the white man to align with his own desires, can be found in the following passage: “When laborers imported from Haiti came to clear the land, clouds and fish were convinced that the world was over, that the sea-green green of the sea and the sky-blue blue of the sky were no longer permanent” (9). This expression mirrors the historical and contemporary pattern of exploitation of land and natural resources by those holding positions of privilege and authority, as exemplified in Valerian’s case. Therefore, Valerian’s mansion, which causes the exploitation of nature, also serves as a microcosm of the larger world, where the characters grapple with the identities and the complex dynamics of race and power. The mansion itself is described in lavish detail, with its grand architecture, exquisite furnishing, and vast collection of art and artifacts from around the world. Valerian’s obsession with collecting and preserving these objects reflects his desire to exert control over his environment and to create a façade of sophistication and refinement. To assert the interconnectedness of all elements in nature and emphasize that any harm inflicted upon nature will result in subsequent adverse repercussions, Morrison writes, “Then the rain changed and was no longer equal. Now it rained not just for an hour every day at the same time, but in seasons, abusing the river even more” (10). Valerian’s alteration of the natural landscape during the construction of his residence, including the greenhouse inside the garden and his endeavor to cultivate plants ill-suited for the island’s climate, can be interpreted as a deliberate attempt to reshape his environment in accordance with his personal desires. Notably, the discussion among the Childs concerning the greenhouse is of particular significance: “He grows hydrangeas in there. And dahlias.” “If he wants hydrangeas he should go back home. He hauls everybody down to the equator to grow Northern flowers?” (13). Valerian’s opulent lifestyle, as in this quote, which includes importing goods, maintaining a large staff, and destructive relationship with nature contribute to ecological disruption and degradation on the island. Furthermore, aside from the ecological harm inflicted, the compulsion of black employees and Jadine to relocate to this land can be construed as indicative of the white man’s exertion of authority and domination.

As the American ecofeminist Rosemary Ruether observes, “Women need to realize that there is no salvation for them or a solution to the ecological crisis in a society based on a single domination” (1975: 204) as a warning to both for women and nature. For Ruether, in societies based on single sovereignty, all other groups labeled as *others* are under threat, and the relocation of the river, maintaining a large black staff, and growing plants that are not suitable for the climate of the island in the narrative support this notion. In similar vein, this control is not only over nature or plants but also over women. As noted above, Jadine’s story is a clear example that humans have the power to alter both nature and lives of humans under their control. Jadine is an African American orphan, but she adopts European manners and behaves like a European. This attitude of Jadine represents the displacement of her historical and cultural roots, as she does not value nature and its inhabitants as a typical African girl. Her position within the mansion reflects the tension between her pursuit of success in the white world and her racial identity. The mansion’s opulence and the privileges it affords her create a sense of conflict within Jadine as she grapples with the expectations and desires that come with her role. Tiffin asserts that “attitudes to the landscape are intimately connected to social values and mores” (2005: 201) to suggest the importance of culture in the perception of nature. This is particularly apt: Jadine disinherits black people’s belief in the sacredness of nature without realizing that her self-alienating treatment by Valerian and other whites is similar to how she is taught to treat nature. In this context, Morrison equates Jadine with nature, both of whom are controlled, dominated, displaced, and othered by male intrusion.

As another important character, Son, who first entered L'Arbe de la Croix as a thief and later became Jadine's lover, is described as someone who, unlike Jadine, has not broken off his roots and his nature. In one scene, when the car runs out of petrol, Son sets off to find petrol, leaving Jadine in the car, where she begins to have sexual fantasies about him. When she walks into the forest, immediately after these dreams, she enters a swamp without realizing it, and as she hugs a tree to get out of the swamp, she hears the sound: "Just count. Don't sweat or you'll lose your partner, the tree. Cleave together like lovers. Press together like men and wife. Cling to your partner, hang on to him and never let him go" (182). Throughout this scene, Jadine is slowly consumed by the swamp, which is associated with sexual desire and erratic thought. Despite her struggle to sink into the deserted land, she finds a solution in nature by embracing a tree. Gaard claims that Western culture identifies emotions related to eroticism and sexuality with women and nature because they have the ability to reproduce, and associates actions that require rationality with men and culture (2001). The swamp is metaphorically connected to Jadine's sexuality and her tar covered body: From the perspective of white patriarchy, both are dirty, murky and dangerous. In fact, the swamp in this scene symbolizes Jadine's unconscious, hiding her newfound love and sexual desire for Son, who is also associated with dangerous sexuality throughout the narrative. Wardi marks off this scene, "Jadine's insistence on reading the tree as a male partner establishes the sexuality of the swamps" (2011: 7). In an ecocritical reading, the metaphorical status of the swamp and Jadine's femininity is furthered by the presence of a tree that is both an image of salvation and a sexualized male partner. However, it is posited that natural elements such as swamps, tar, mud, and trees are objects of oppression for individuals adhering to an androcentric ideology, which asserts the prerogative to exploit both women and the natural environment.

After a big fight in L'Arbe de la Croix between the Streets and the Childs, Son and Jadine decide to flee separately so as not to be seen as lovers. They go to New York and start a new life, which is full of challenges for Son, who prefers to live according to his own rules and ambitions, which cause conflicts between them. After a while, Son persuades Jadine to visit Eloë, Son's hometown, which involves a psychological journey that leads them to reckon with the mistakes of the past and, at the same time, to discover their true connection with their own roots. Jadine, who is assimilated by the whites who forced her to change her beliefs, attitudes, and cultural artifacts in order to adapt to white culture, displays another persona that shows how far away she is from her true self. In more detail, Karen Warren asserts that ecofeminism is not only a field centered on nature and women, but also covers universal issues such as the politics of war, racism and class discrimination (1996). Morrison looks at this situation from the axis of the universal issues of racism and assimilation of black people and critically exposes the domination of modern Western culture. She critiques Jadine's assimilation by portraying how in Eloë she reacts to her own people and historical roots: "Blacker and bleaker than Isle des Chevaliers, and loud. Loud, with the presence of plants and field life. If she was wanting air, there wasn't any. It's not possible, she thought, for anything to be this black" (251). This comparison between Isle des Chevaliers and Eloë is really about the preference for the modern and assimilated over the primitive and independent one. The independent nature and people of Eloë are unfamiliar to Jadine, who is oppressed by the anthropocentric and chauvinistic attempts of a male-dominated society. To illustrate her mental state in Eloë, Morrison reflects on her feelings:

She might as well have been in a cave, a grave, the dark womb of the earth, suffocating with the sound of plant life moving, but deprived of its sight. She could see nothing and could not remember what she had seen when it was daylight. (252)

The above description is literally about the roots of plants, which exist under the ground, a territory unknown, associated often with dirt and decay — just like how black people are perceived, but without it life is not possible. Therefore, the unfamiliarity between Jadine and Eloë represents her alienation from her true self and cultural roots that truly brings the oppressed nature/women so close to the discovery of their broken alliance. As Wu puts black women’s alienation, “According to traditional Western culture, women are universalized as passive, fragile, and inferior to men. Then, the black women are in the poorer condition that are stripped of all the rights and hence lose their individuality” (2019: 966). These indictments by Wu focus on the exploited nature of black women under the hegemony of white men. For the most part, Jadine thinks and acts in ways that show her ignoring her cultural heritage in order to escape the inferiority of being a black woman. Hence, it goes without saying that Jadine, like any Western modern woman, equates her existence with metropolises rather than nature. Upon Jadine’s return from Eloë, she experiences a heightened sense of comfort within the urbanized and cultivated landscape of New York:

After two months of stingless bees, butterflies and avocado trees, the smart thin trees on Fifty-Third Street refreshed her. They were to scale, human-seized, and the buildings did not threaten her like the hills of the island had, for these were full of people whose joints were oiled just like hers. This is home, she thought with an orphan’s delight. (221-222)

Jadine finds herself estranged from the symbiotic relationship between nature and women, a fundamental strategy for survival, or, at the very least, a means to liberate herself from racial marginalization. Not coincidentally, Jadine’s adherence to the white norms prevents her from forming intimate relationships with anyone in the narrative. Her individualistic self-perception sets her apart from the black community where women are typically perceived as passive participants. It would be appropriate to note that what Jadine feels and aspires to do is shaped by the marginalization of women and black people. Morgan, who defines male domination as the most primitive form of sovereignty and characterizes all other forms of exploitation as extensions of male domination, argues that these oppressions affect every aspect of women’s lives (1970). Hence, Jadine’s endeavors and accomplishments, characterized by the experience of being perceived as different or *other*, enable her to form a distinct and elevated cultural background that distinguishes her from the stereotypical African woman. However, upon falling in love with Son, she is compelled to reconnect with her cultural heritage and recollects the traditional roles of womanhood within the black community. Given the novel’s overt concern, the continued exploitation of nature and women takes on added significance at this point, as Jadine idealizes a future akin to that of the modern white woman, while Son views embracing such a future as acquiescence to the assimilation objectives of the white population. Jadine’s attempt may be interpreted as her rejection of her identity as the exploited, as defined by the cultural insidencies imposed upon her by oppressors, as outlined by Plumwood (1993). In conjunction with Plumwood’s arguments, Son criticizes Jadine as a commodity deemed valuable within the framework of Western culture, yet devoid of authenticity in her black heritage essence. To explain this, he holds the charge that “she has prostituted herself to a system of white privilege, to a fashion industry that exploits women, for the wealth, status, and privileges produced by capitalism” (Lutz, 2013: 64). Rejecting the FRO-American heritage idealized by Son, Jadine leaves him behind to protect her sense of freedom and self-realization. Paradoxically, while initially perceiving nature as both primitive and inferior, Jadine, contrary to Son’s allegations of her mimicking white modernity, draws a distinct analogy between nature and her way of life as she boards a plane bound for Paris to commence on a new chapter:

Bearing, hunting, eating, fighting, burying. No time for dreaming, although sometimes, late in life, somewhere between the thirtieth and fortieth generation she might get wind of summer storm one day. [...] But soldier ants do not have time for dreaming. They are women and have much to do. Still it would be hard. (292)

The final conflict between Jadine and Son is a culmination of their differing views on identity, culture, and their roles in society. This argument, which is about staying on the island or returning to New York, actually, reflects the broader concerns of the novel such as cultural assimilation, the tension between tradition and modernity, and irreconcilable differences between man and woman. Consequently, it is contended that following her ultimate dispute with Son, the appearance of soldier ants, all of them females, accompanies Jadine's transformation to find her inner spiritual strength. In addition to gender resemblance shared by Jadine and the soldier ants that invade the greenhouse at L'Arbe de la Croix, the social structure of these ants implies a communal lifestyle that contrasts with Jadine's individualistic way of life. With these strong associations in mind, she is on her way to begin a new life in Paris again, but as Everson aptly puts it, "Although Jadine flies off alone to Paris, the image of the colony suggests that she remains identified with a community, albeit a female one" (1989: 75). In refusing to be a symbol of black identity, she is not betraying her black heritage; she is attempting to free herself from all other stereotypes. In essence, she wants to be seen as an individual, recognized for her unique qualities, rather than being confined to a particular racial or cultural stereotype. In one part of the narrative, she expresses her desire, "I want to get out of my skin, and be only the person inside—not American—not black—just me" (40). This extract does not suggest that she is rejecting her ethnic background, but that she wants to be free. In this sense, Everson claims that "rejecting the traditional identification of women with body and nature, she has, nevertheless, learned to draw power from these sources" (1989: 77). In particular, her sense of individualism has undergone a profound change through her journeys to New York, Paris, L'Arbe de la Croix, and Eloë, collectively nurturing to Jadine's spiritual maturation.

Within the broader ecofeminist structure of the narrative, the predominantly implicit exploitation of both nature and women symbolizes the brutality and commodification inherent in society. Jadine perceives herself as an educated, independent, and bourgeois woman, unaware of the racial imagery imposed upon her by society. Ironically, she remains oblivious to the victimization she has endured at the hands of both whites and men throughout her life. Her favorite seal skin coat is a central example of this unawareness. A gift from her boyfriend, Ryk, "the coat is a product of massive slaughter and disregard for life informed by the exploitation of nature" (Lutz, 2013: 59). While Lutz agrees with this slaughter, Jadine confesses in the narrative that she knows of ninety baby seals slaughtered for this seductive black coat, which is a manifestation of the brutality of the capitalist world. Jadine's erotic characterization of this coat could be seen as evidence of her genuine intimacy with this commodity. In fact, unbeknownst to herself, Jadine herself has become no more than a commodity: "As a fashion model who wears clothes for a living, Jadine too is a commodity whose subjective identity is subordinate to what she signifies as an article for exchange" (Lutz, 2013: 59). As Lutz aptly summarizes, Jadine is unaware of her image as an exploited commodity. This shared fate between Jadine and the coat and the animals that were slaughtered for it, actually points to the microcosmic picture of the capitalist society. Therefore, it can be asserted that all the relationships depicted in the novel indicate a high degree of sophistication in terms of exploitation.

As well as being oppressed by the exploitative nature of capitalist society, Jadine is seen as a sexual object by Son, who makes explicit reference to the commodification of her body by her lover. Driven by the impulse to dominate, Son is largely unaware of his unconscious attempt to exploit Jadine sexually and economically when she supports him with the money she earns from modeling. It is entirely fitting that Son's emotional, racial, and social entanglements drive him to critique Jadine for what he perceives as her exploitation by white society. Paradoxically, he remains unaware that his own attitudes reflect a form of colonization rooted in traditional male hegemony and Wyatt explains this intricacy: "Jadine, tormented by the sense that she must choose between adherence to capitalist values and race loyalty" (2014: 44). By highlighting Jadine's inner struggle, Wyatt points out that all these turmoil makes her emotionally vulnerable to exploitation.

Jadine, as Mills reminds us, "is cut off from her African-American roots at a young age and bereft of a homeland" (2001: 1), she is culturally displaced, and her assimilated lifestyle does not align with Son's dominant perspective. Ultimately, he forces Jadine to reaffirm her identity as a black woman by renouncing the possibilities offered by the white capitalist world. To sum up, if the narrative subtly alludes to the oppression of both nature and women, a more precise assertion would be that women and the nature within the novel are jointly exploited by a male-dominated society.

Conclusion

Ecofeminism clarifies the conceptual links between nature and women in terms of domination, oppression, colonialism, sexism, and racism. The literary works that involve the manipulation of nature and women made possible by the advances in science and technology demonstrate the interwoven hierarchical connections among the degradation of nature and sexism, racism, colonialism, and other forms of oppression. Especially the oldest two of these negatively valued agents, nature and women, play pivotal roles in fostering a literary movement centered on nature and women, serving as symbols to highlight the subjugation of both women and the non-human world. In conjunction with theoretical frameworks, a comprehensive examination of literary works is essential for the reevaluation and reshaping of the discourse surrounding the interconnected themes of nature and women. In this vein, it is possible to state that this approach aligns seamlessly with any literary endeavor that seeks to amplify the voices and narratives of women and the non-human world.

Toni Morrison, one of the most influential African-American writers, is reputed as a writer who gives priority to black women who have been the victims of a male-dominated system. In addition to works with a focus on race, her work links the oppression of nature and women, making it possible to read it from an ecofeminist perspective. Morrison portrays the interconnectedness between nature and women, illustrating the mental and physical exploitation endured by those historically relegated to inferior positions relative to men. In this context, one can assert that nearly all of her literary works, including *A Mercy*, *Beloved*, and *Paradise*, offer depictions of the oppression of women, the degradation of the natural world, and the prevailing anthropocentric perspectives that underpin the exploitation of these thematic elements. Influenced by her ecofeminist attitude towards these objects of oppression, *Tar Baby* is chosen as the primary concept of this study, which attempts to clarify the relationship between male/female and the human/non-human dichotomies. From the analysis above, it is clear that Morrison's use of *Tar Baby* is in fact a conflation of the two, implying a patriarchal attack on these two disadvantaged groups. In the novel, Valerian, the symbol of white male domination, oppresses nature for the sake of the insatiable demands of his ego and implicitly assimilates Jadine by supporting her financially to enable her to

be educated in schools dominated by white students. While the narrative remains silent on whether this action was motivated by evil intent, it is evident that it led to Jadine's estrangement from her native culture and subsequent assimilation. It symbolizes the masculine ideology of the Western capitalist world, reinforcing his role as an exploitative and destructive figure. More specifically, from an ecofeminist perspective, his male supremacy is seen as the primary cause of ecological destruction and disharmony on the island.

As an additional character symbolizing male oppression within the novel, Son, unlike Valerian, appears to have an intimate connection with both nature and women. This connection is exemplified by his ability to nurture the flourishing of flowers within the greenhouse and is perceived by Valerian as a symbol of productivity. However, his implicit dominance over Jadine also, in a sense, confirms his supremacy as a male in the black yet patriarchal society. It should be noted that Morrison prompts readers to contemplate his hypocrisy of perceiving Jadine as a commodity of capitalism, even as the character simultaneously relies on her financial support. Son's chauvinistic attitude towards white assimilation contradicts with his exploitation of Jadine's body. It is suggested that he values Jadine as a sex object rather than as an equal partner. In a word, he is kind to nature, unlike Valerian, yet compels Jadine to conform to conventional expectations of a black girl within the community of Eloë, conforming to the prescribed gender roles associated with black heritage.

Replete with complexities and intricacies, *Tar Baby* affirms the interrelation between the exploitation of women and nature within a patriarchal capitalist milieu. Oppressed by wealthy white men and a black thief, nature and Jadine concurrently evoke interconnected concerns within the framework of ecofeminism. With this novel, Morrison has confirmed that women and nature are two objects of oppression according to the materialist view of the new modern world.

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