



Exploring Otherness in Toni Morrison’s “Beloved”: A Postcolonial Ecocritical Perspective

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Abstract

This article delves into the concept of otherness in Toni Morrison’s novel “Beloved” through a postcolonial ecocritical lens. By examining the interactions between characters and their environment, the article aims to explore how notions of identity, power, and belonging are shaped by historical and environmental contexts. Key themes such as slavery, trauma, memory, and the impact of the past on the present are analyzed through the perspectives of postcolonial theory and ecocriticism. Through this analysis, the article seeks to uncover the complexities of otherness in the novel and its implications for understanding the relationships between humans, nature, and society. Employing close reading technique, this article tries to answer the following questions: 1- How does the postcolonial ecocritical approach enhance our understanding of the concept of otherness in “Beloved”? 2- In what ways do historical and environmental factors influence the construction of otherness in the novel? 3- How do characters in “Beloved” navigate issues of identity, power, and belonging in relation to the concept of otherness?

1. INTRODUCTION

In Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*, the interplay between African Americans and the natural world is woven with profound symbolism and narrative depth. The novel, set against the backdrop of post-Civil War America, delves into the harrowing experiences of its characters, who have endured the brutalities of slavery and are in search of identity and belonging in a world that has long dehumanized them. Morrison’s narrative presents the natural world as both a witness to the characters’ suffering and a space for potential healing and connection. In *Beloved*, the environment is not merely a passive setting but an active participant in the story, reflecting the two faces of what can be termed ‘two colonized others’—the African American individuals and the natural world itself. Both have been subjected to control and exploitation, yet they exhibit resilience and agency.

African American characters and the natural world as “two colonized others” refers to the parallel experiences of exploitation and subjugation shared by both African Americans and the environment under the oppressive structures of slavery and colonialism. Both are seen as entities to be dominated and used for their labor or resources, stripped of agency and regarded as property rather than as autonomous beings with intrinsic value. Morrison’s narrative underscores the interconnectedness of

their fates and the mutual impact of their colonization, as well as their potential for resilience and resistance against the forces that seek to control them. So, how does Morrison successfully intertwine Sweet Home Plantation with the community of colour, representing two facets of oppression and othering? Additionally, how do characters such as Sethe, Denver, and Paul D grapple with the challenge of reconstructing their lost identities in an effort to establish a sense of belonging within their community, rather than experiencing alienation? Lastly, in what ways do Sethe and the Chokecherry tree exemplify the environmental belonging and green agency within the Black community in *Beloved*?

2. Sethe, Denver, and Paul D, and Identity Re-Construction: Belonging not Othering

In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, the theme of identity re-construction in a space where belonging supersedes othering is a central narrative thread that can be analyzed through a postcolonial ecocritical lens. This approach allows us to explore how the characters Sethe, Denver, and Paul D navigate their identities in relation to both the social structures of post-slavery America and their interactions with the natural world. So, how identity re-construction is intertwined with the experience of characters such as Sethe, Denver, and Paul D? and how Morrison's main characters develop a sense of belonging out of spaces of trauma and othering?

Sethe's identity is deeply intertwined with her experiences at Sweet Home and her act of infanticide, which she sees as a desperate assertion of agency in a world that denies her humanity. Her re-construction of identity is a continuous struggle to reconcile her past with her present, to transform a place of trauma into one of belonging. The natural world around her, which has been a silent witness to her pain, becomes a space where she can reconnect with herself and her lost daughter, Beloved. Sethe's relationship with the environment, as seen in her interactions with the natural elements in her home, reflects her attempt to create a nurturing space that contrasts with the brutality of her past. Sethe's identity is shaped by her traumatic experiences at Sweet Home and her act of infanticide, which are central to her story and the novel's exploration of the lasting effects of slavery on individual and collective identities:

Denver thought she understood the connection between her mother and Beloved: Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it. But there would never be an end to that, and seeing her mother diminished shamed and infuriated her. Yet she knew Sethe's greatest fear was the same one Denver had in the beginning—that Beloved might leave. That before Sethe could make her understand what it meant—what it took to drag the teeth of that saw under the little chin; to feel the baby blood pump like oil in her hands; to hold her face so her head would stay on; to squeeze her so she could absorb, still, the death spasms that shot through that adored body, plump and sweet with life—Beloved might leave. Leave before Sethe could make her realize that worse than that—far worse—was what Baby Suggs died

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of, what Ella knew, what Stamp saw and what made Paul D tremble. That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up. (Morrison, 2004, p. 251)

This poignantly captures the depth of Sethe's trauma and the way her identity is inextricably linked to her past experiences at Sweet Home and the devastating choice she made to kill her own child, Beloved, to prevent her from being subjected to the horrors of slavery. Sethe's act of infanticide is a manifestation of her maternal instinct to protect her child from the dehumanizing and destructive forces of slavery, which she herself endured.

The graphic description of Sethe's act, "to drag the teeth of that saw under the little chin; to feel the baby blood pump like oil in her hands," is a visceral reminder of the violence that Sethe felt compelled to commit in a desperate attempt to assert control over her and her children's destinies. This act is not only a physical one but also a psychological one, as it forever alters Sethe's sense of self. The burden of this act is something she carries with her, shaping her identity as a mother who has both given life and taken it away in the name of love and protection.

Morrison also touches on the collective trauma experienced by the African American community, referencing Baby Suggs, Ella, Stamp, and Paul D, who all understand the dehumanizing potential of white power to "dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore". This shared understanding among the characters highlights the pervasive impact of slavery on their identities and the struggle to maintain a sense of self in a world that seeks to erase it. Sethe's fear that Beloved might leave before understanding why Sethe did what she did underscores the complexity of her identity. Sethe's identity is not only that of a mother who has lost a child but also that of a woman who needs to be understood and forgiven, not just by others but by Beloved and herself. The need for Beloved to comprehend the depth of Sethe's love and the extremity of her actions speaks to Sethe's desire for reconciliation with her past and a reclamation of her own humanity. Sethe struggles also to re-build a sense of belonging to her community:

When the music entered the window she was wringing a cool cloth to put on Beloved's forehead. Beloved, sweating profusely, was sprawled on the bed in the keeping room, a salt rock in her hand. Both women heard it at the same time and both lifted their heads. As the voices grew louder, Beloved sat up, licked the salt and went into the bigger room. Sethe and she exchanged glances and started toward the window. They saw Denver sitting on the steps and beyond her, where the yard met the road, they saw the rapt faces of thirty neighborhood women. Some had their eyes closed; others looked at the hot, cloudless sky. Sethe opened the door and reached for Beloved's hand.

Together they stood in the doorway. For Sethe, it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (Morrison, 2004, p. 261)

Sethe is on the cusp of rejoining her community, symbolized by the gathering of the neighborhood women and their collective singing. The music that enters the window and the presence of the women outside her home represent the community reaching out to her, offering a chance for Sethe to reconnect and find her place among them. The imagery of the Clearing and the powerful wave of sound suggest a spiritual and emotional cleansing, a potential rebirth for Sethe as she stands in the doorway, poised between her isolated life inside 124 and the community outside. This moment signifies Sethe's struggle and her possible re-entry into a sense of belonging within her community.

Morrison encapsulates the theme of community belonging through the transformative power of collective action and shared experience. The music that enters the window signifies a moment of connection between Sethe, her daughter Beloved, and the community outside. The act of the neighbourhood women coming together and singing outside of Sethe's home represents a communal effort to reach out and include Sethe and Beloved in their circle, symbolizing an offer of healing and acceptance. Sethe's reaction to the music and the presence of the women is deeply emotional. The description of the Clearing coming to her, with its "heat and simmering leaves," evokes a sacred space where healing rituals were performed by the community's spiritual leader, Baby Suggs. The Clearing was a place of solace and communal bonding, and the women's voices outside Sethe's home recreate this environment, bringing it to her doorstep. The reference to the Clearing suggests that the community is willing to embrace Sethe and help her heal from her traumatic past.

The collective voices of the women are described as searching for "the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words." This metaphor suggests that the women are striving to communicate something that transcends language—a deep empathy and understanding that can only be expressed through their shared vocal expression. The sound they create is likened to a "wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees," which indicates the immense power and impact of their unity. This wave of sound washes over Sethe, causing her to tremble "like the baptized in its wash," which symbolizes a form of rebirth or cleansing. The community's act of singing is a ritual that offers Sethe a chance to be reborn into the community, to wash away the isolation and stigma that have kept her apart.

Sethe is on the threshold, both literally and figuratively, as she stands in the doorway holding Beloved's hand. The doorway represents the boundary between the interior space of isolation and the

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exterior world of community. By reaching out and taking Beloved's hand, Sethe is making a choice to step forward and potentially rejoin the community that is calling her. The passage illustrates the theme of community belonging by showing how the collective voice and presence of the neighbourhood women offer Sethe a path back into the fold, suggesting that healing and reconciliation are possible through the support and acceptance of the community. The women's act of coming together to sing outside Sethe's home is a powerful gesture of solidarity and empathy, indicating that despite Sethe's past and the isolation she has endured, there is a place for her within the communal heart. This moment of potential reintegration highlights the importance of community in overcoming personal trauma and the significance of collective efforts in restoring a sense of belonging and identity to those who have been marginalized.

Denver's identity formation is also in a process of reconstruction, as she seeks to carve out a sense of self that is distinct from the shadows of her family's history. Her initial isolation and fear of the outside world are gradually replaced by a growing sense of independence and a desire to engage with the community beyond 124:

Denver stood on the porch of 124 ready to be swallowed up in the world beyond the edge of the porch. Out there were small things scratched and sometimes touched. Where words could be spoken that would close your ears shut. Where, if you were alone, the feeling could overtake you and stick to you like a shadow. Out there where there were places in which things so bad had happened that when you went near them it would happen again.
(Morrison, 2004, p. 243-244)

This passage conveys Denver's trepidation and sense of vulnerability as she contemplates stepping beyond the familiar confines of her home. The imagery of being "swallowed up" by the world and the mention of "small things" that could scratch or touch her underscore her fear of the unknown and the potential dangers that lie outside her immediate environment. The reference to places where "things so bad had happened" suggests a deep-seated fear rooted in the traumatic history of her family and the broader context of slavery and its aftermath. Denver's isolation is both physical and emotional, as she is hesitant to engage with the world beyond her doorstep.

However, Denver's connection to the natural environment, particularly the creek where she finds solace and a sense of belonging, is emblematic of her journey towards self-discovery and her eventual emergence from the suffocating confines of her home life:

Just ahead, at the edge of the stream, Denver could see her silhouette, standing barefoot in the water, lifting her black skirts up above her calves, the beautiful head lowered in rapt attention. Blinking fresh tears Denver approached her—

eager for a word, a sign of forgiveness. Denver took off her shoes and stepped into the water with her. (Morrison, 2004, p. 105)

This is a clear representation of Denver's re-connection with the natural world as a means of reconstructing her sense of identity and belonging. The stream, as a natural element, serves as a site of solace and reflection for Denver, a place where she can engage with her environment away from the traumatic legacy of slavery that haunts her family and community. The act of standing barefoot in the water is symbolic of a grounding experience, a return to the basics of existence and a direct contact with the earth that supports her. This connection to the land and water is significant in postcolonial contexts, where colonized peoples were often dispossessed of their lands and stripped of their relationships with their environments. Denver's interaction with the stream is a moment of reclamation, a subtle yet profound act of resistance against the historical forces that have sought to sever such ties.

Ecocriticism often explores the ways in which individuals and communities relate to their environment and how these relationships shape their identities. Denver's immersion in the stream is a moment of cleansing and renewal, suggesting a rebirth or a redefinition of self that is in harmony with the natural world. Her eagerness for "a word, a sign of forgiveness" indicates a desire for reconciliation, not only with the person she is approaching but perhaps also with the land itself, which has been a silent witness to the suffering of her ancestors. Moreover, the image of Denver lifting her skirts to step into the water reflects a breaking away from the constraints of her previous life. It is a moment of vulnerability and openness to change, as she exposes herself to the elements and to new possibilities of being. The natural environment here is not just a backdrop but an active participant in Denver's journey towards self-discovery and empowerment.

Denver chooses to re-construct her identity and belonging through an intimate engagement with the natural world. The stream becomes a space where she can renegotiate her place in the world, free from the historical traumas that have shaped her existence. This ecocritical reading emphasizes the importance of the environment in shaping individual and collective identities, particularly in postcolonial contexts where such relationships have been disrupted by the legacies of colonization and slavery.

Concerning Paul D, his journey is one of constant movement and displacement, a search for a place where he can belong without being "othered" by the color of his skin or the scars of his past. His experiences of wandering through the back roads of America, encountering other displaced individuals, reflect the collective search for identity and belonging in a post-slavery society. African American characters in *Beloved* experienced a fragmented and nomadic existence in the aftermath of the Civil War, as they sought to rebuild their lives and find a sense of community and belonging in a society that was still grappling with the deep scars of slavery. Morrison narrates:

Paul D smiled. He recognized the careful enunciation of letters by those, like himself, who could not read but had memorized the letters of their name. He was about to ask who her people were but thought better of it. A young coloredwoman drifting was drifting from ruin. ...The War had been over four or five years then, but nobody white or black seemed to know it. Odd clusters and strays of Negroes wandered the back roads and cowpaths from Schenectady to Jackson. Dazed but insistent, they searched each other out for word of a cousin, an aunt, a friend who once said, "Call on me. Anytime you get near Chicago, just call on me." ...Silent, except for social courtesies, when they met one another they neither described nor asked about the sorrow that drove them from one place to another. The whites didn't bear speaking on. Everybody knew.

So, he did not press the young woman with the broken hat about where from or how come. If she wanted them to know and was strong enough to get through the telling, she would. What occupied them at the moment was what it might be that she needed. Underneath the major question, each harbored another. (Morrison, 2004, p. 52-53)

Paul D's recognition of the "careful enunciation of letters" by those who could not read but knew their names signifies a poignant striving for identity amidst a landscape of upheaval. The act of memorizing the letters of one's name becomes a form of resistance and self-affirmation in a society that has systematically attempted to erase individual identities. The mention of "a young coloredwoman drifting from ruin" and the "odd clusters and strays of Negroes" wandering the back roads and cowpaths highlights the displacement and fragmentation of African American communities. The environment they traverse is not just a physical space but a representation of their social and historical displacement. The back roads and cowpaths symbolize marginal spaces that African Americans are forced to navigate, as they are excluded from the main routes of society due to racial discrimination.

The collective movement of displaced individuals searching for family and community reflects a broader quest for belonging and reconnection with lost roots. The environment here is both a witness to their struggles and a participant in their journey. The "dead crops, dead kin, life threats, and took-over land" speak to the ecological devastation that parallels the social and cultural destruction experienced by these communities. The silence among the travelers about their sorrows and the unspoken understanding of the "whites" who "didn't bear speaking on" indicates a shared trauma that is deeply rooted in the landscape of America. The land itself is imbued with the memory of slavery and the ongoing oppression of African Americans. Paul D's interaction with the young woman and his decision not to press her for her story underscores the respect for individual experiences of trauma and the recognition that each person's journey to healing and identity is personal and complex.

The novel at hand illustrates the environmental and social landscapes that African Americans navigate in their search for identity and belonging. It shows how the natural world is intertwined with the historical legacy of slavery and the ongoing struggle for autonomy and recognition. The back roads and cowpaths symbolize not only the physical journey but also the metaphorical paths that African Americans must tread to carve out a space for themselves in a society that has historically marginalized them. The environment, thus, becomes a silent witness to their resilience and a space of both constraint and possibility. The characters' interactions with the land and each other reveal a deep yearning for community and a sense of place, which is often denied to them due to the color of their skin and the scars of their past. Morrison's narrative, through its vivid imagery and complex character dynamics, underscores the importance of acknowledging and addressing the intertwined issues of racial injustice and environmental degradation as part of the broader quest for healing and equity.

Paul D's relationship with the natural world is marked by a sense of transience, yet it also offers moments of connection and reflection that contribute to his re-construction of identity:

Once he met a Negro about fourteen years old who lived by himself in the woods and said he couldn't remember living anywhere else. He saw a witless coloredwoman jailed and hanged for stealing ducks she believed were her own babies. (Morrison, 2004, p. 66)

Paul D reflects on his encounters with other African Americans who have been marginalized and othered by society. The young boy who lives by himself in the woods and the woman who is punished for a crime that stems from her disconnection from reality both represent the extreme outcomes of being othered. Paul D's observation of these individuals and his own experiences in the natural world highlight the role of the environment as a space where marginalized individuals can find solace, confront their past, and seek to rebuild their identities away from the societal structures that have oppressed them. The natural world serves as a backdrop for Paul D's journey towards understanding himself and finding a place where he belongs.

Furthermore, the natural world and indigenous guidance play a crucial role in Paul D's journey toward freedom and the reconstruction of his identity. Through Paul D's journey, Morrison was able to combine elements that were united in being victims of the white colonial machinery: Native Americans, African Americans, and nature. These elements came together to participate in Paul D's, among other runaway slaves, journey for freedom and self-reconstruction:

Buffalo men, they called them, and talked slowly to the prisoners scooping mush and tapping away at their chains. Nobody from a box in Alfred, Georgia, cared about the illness the Cherokee warned them about, so they stayed, all forty-six, resting, planning their next move. ...Hi Man wanted to join them; others wanted to join him. Some wanted to leave; some to stay on.

Weeks later Paul D was the only Buffalo man left—without a plan. All he could think of was tracking dogs, although Hi Man said the rain they left in gave that no chance of success. Alone, the last man with buffalo hair among the ailing Cherokee, Paul D finally woke up and, admitting his ignorance, asked how he might get North. Free North. Magical North. Welcoming, benevolent North. The Cherokee smiled and looked around. The flood rains of a month ago had turned everything to steam and blossoms. (Morrison, 2004, p. 112)

The term “Buffalo men” refers to the African American prisoners, likening them to the buffalo, an animal that is native to the American landscape and, like the African American slaves, faced near extinction due to the expansion of European settlers. This metaphor underscores the connection between the oppressed bodies of the slaves and the exploited natural world. The Cherokee’s warning about the illness and the prisoners’ subsequent disregard for it reflect a complex relationship between colonialism, indigenous wisdom, and the environment. The Cherokee, having experienced their own history of displacement and suffering due to colonial expansion, possess a deep understanding of the land and its patterns. However, the prisoners, focused on their immediate survival and escape, overlook this indigenous knowledge, which could have been crucial for their well-being.

Moreover, Paul D’s admission of ignorance and his question about how to reach the North symbolize his openness to learning from the Cherokee and the natural world. The North here is not just a geographical direction but a symbol of freedom and hope—a “Magical North” that promises a new beginning away from the horrors of slavery. The Cherokee’s response, a smile and a gesture to the transformed landscape, suggests that the path to freedom is intertwined with an understanding and appreciation of the natural world. The “flood rains” that have turned everything “to steam and blossoms” signify a moment of renewal and change. Just as the landscape has been altered by the rains, so too must Paul D transform and adapt if he is to find his way to freedom. The natural world, in its resilience and ability to flourish after devastation, serves as a model for Paul D’s own journey of healing and self-discovery. In *Beloved*, both the environment and the Natives are sources of knowledge and empowerment for those seeking to escape the confines of an oppressive system: “That way,” he said, pointing. “Follow the tree flowers,” he said. “Only the tree flowers. As they go, you go. You will be where you want to be when they are gone” (Morrison, 2004, p. 112). Morrison uses metaphor to talk about Paul D’s journey towards self-determination and the search for a place of belonging that is free from the oppressive structures of colonialism.

What’s more, the guidance to follow the tree flowers represents a connection to the land and a form of navigation that is deeply rooted in the natural world, rather than the imposed borders and maps of colonial powers. This indigenous method of finding one’s way through the landscape is in stark contrast to the European reliance on cartography and compasses, which often disregarded the existing

knowledge and practices of native peoples. The ephemeral nature of the tree flowers, which bloom and then disappear, suggests a path that is transient and requires a deep understanding of the environment. It is a path that is not fixed or owned, but one that is shared with and dictated by the cycles of nature. This reflects a postcolonial desire to move away from the fixed boundaries and ownership of land that came with colonial rule, towards a more harmonious and reciprocal relationship with the environment.

Moreover, the idea of reaching a destination “when they are gone” implies that the journey itself is transformative. The traveler will not be the same person upon arrival as they were when they set out, much like postcolonial societies must transform and evolve as they recover from the impacts of colonialism and forge new identities. The natural world provides a means of escape from the legacies of colonialism, offering a path to freedom that is both literal and symbolic, and which leads to a place where one’s identity can be reclaimed and redefined on one’s own terms.

Paul D’s journey towards freedom and self-rediscovery is intrinsically linked to the natural environment. Morrison metaphorically uses the progression of spring and the blooming of various trees to illustrate the path to liberation from the oppressive structures of slavery:

So he raced from dogwood to blossoming peach. When they thinned out he headed for the cherry blossoms, then magnolia, chinaberry, pecan, walnut and prickly pear. At last he reached a field of apple trees whose flowers were just becoming tiny knots of fruit. Spring sauntered north, but he had to run like hell to keep it as his traveling companion. From February to July he was on the lookout for blossoms. When he lost them, and found himself without so much as a petal to guide him, he paused, climbed a tree on a hillock and scanned the horizon for a flash of pink or white in the leaf world that surrounded him. He did not touch them or stop to smell. He merely followed in their wake, a dark ragged figure guided by the blossoming plums.
(Morrison, 2004, p. 112-113)

Paul D’s movement from one flowering tree to another—dogwood, peach, cherry, magnolia, chinaberry, pecan, walnut, prickly pear, and apple—reflects a reliance on the natural world as a guide. This reliance on nature’s cues stands in contrast to the imposed, artificial boundaries and landmarks of colonial cartography. The trees, with their sequential blossoming, provide a natural map and timeline that the character must interpret and follow. The urgency with which he must “run like hell” to keep spring as his companion speaks to the fleeting opportunity for escape and the narrow window of time in which the natural world offers its guidance. This urgency also reflects the broader struggle for freedom faced by colonized peoples, who must often seize brief moments of opportunity to assert their autonomy.

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Paul D's decision not to touch or smell the flowers but to follow them suggests a respectful, non-exploitative relationship with the environment. This contrasts with the colonial exploitation of both the land and its people. The protagonist's journey is one of harmony with the land, rather than dominance over it. Furthermore, the image of the "dark ragged figure" guided by the "blossoming plums" evokes a sense of rebirth and hope. The blossoms symbolize new beginnings and the potential for growth and change, much like the postcolonial subject's search for a new identity and place in the world after the end of colonial rule.

Through Sethe, Denver, and Paul D, Morrison illustrates the complex interplay between identity, belonging, and the environment. The postcolonial ecocritical perspective highlights how the characters' identities are not only shaped by their social and historical contexts but also by their relationship with the land and the non-human elements around them, which serve as both a site of trauma and a source of healing and connection. This perspective underscores the ways in which the natural environment is entangled with the characters' processes of identity re-construction, offering a space for redefining selfhood beyond the confines of colonial and oppressive narratives.

3. Sethe and the Chokecherry Tree: Green Agency Rooted on the Slaves' Skin

Humans have consistently found fascination in nature, with trees holding a revered status in nearly every culture, as noted by psychology professor David Fontana. Various cultures have identified specific trees as sacred, attributing particular meanings to certain tree species and elevating them above others. Meanwhile, J. C Cooper, an authority on symbolism through extensive writing and lectures, explains that a green tree typically symbolizes eternal life, immortality, and spirits that endure beyond death. Conversely, a deciduous tree shedding its leaves is indicative of new life, rebirth, and resurrection.

The chokecherry tree on Sethe's back has received a large number of scholarly attentions. Anissa Janine Wardi in *Toni Morrison and the Natural World: An Ecology of Color* contends that: "the arboreal display on Sethe's back is a complex symbol, at once a reminder of schoolteacher and his nephew's brutality—a metonym for the nation's violence—and at the same time a powerful association of Sethe with the natural, living world" (Wardi, 2021, Kindle). In "From the Same Tree: Gender and Iconography in Representation of Violence in *Beloved*," Sandy Alexandre confirms that the scars represent "black female trauma writ large, as large as a chokecherry tree," she adds later that this must be considered "as a woman's rape tree and as a man's lynching tree" (Alexandre, 2011, p. 936). Lorie Watkins Fulton, in "Hiding Fire and Brimstone in Lacy Groves: The Twinned Trees of *Beloved*," argues that: "the deadened skin of Sethe's back clearly represents feelings about the past that she refuses to give free rein" (Fulton, 2005, p. 190).

The chokecherry tree on Sethe's back is a powerful symbol of her environmental attachment, representing how her identity is intertwined with her past experiences and the natural world that bears witness to her story. Wardi maintains that: "this scar evidences Sethe's elision with trees. She is trans corporeally part of the arboreal world, and while Paul D is associated with trees, Sethe is the tree" (Wardi, 2021, Kindle). It is a constant reminder of where she has been and the resilience she possesses, much like the enduring nature of trees in the landscape. This tree, described as having a "trunk, branches, and even leaves", is not a natural growth but a representation of the scars left by a brutal whipping. The scars form a pattern that resembles a tree, which Amy, a white girl who helps Sethe, interprets as a chokecherry tree in bloom. So, how the chokecherry tree symbolizes Sethe's environmental attachment? And how does Morrison succeed in the use of this imagery to reject the othering of her character and make her feel a sense of belonging which was denied to her?

The tree's presence on Sethe's back signifies the deep wounds of slavery, which are as much a part of her as the natural elements are to a landscape. It is a permanent mark of the physical and psychological trauma that Sethe has endured, much like the way trees bear the marks of their history in their rings and scars. The tree is a testament to Sethe's resilience and her ability to survive and continue growing, much like a tree does after being damaged. Moreover, the tree is a symbol of Sethe's environmental attachment because it is a literal representation of her past being inscribed onto her body, showing how her life is rooted in the experiences that have shaped her, just as a tree is rooted in the soil. The scars, like tree rings, tell a story of survival and growth despite adversity. Sethe's body becomes a part of the landscape of her past, carrying the physical manifestation of her history and the environment in which it occurred.

The tree also connects Sethe to the natural world in a way that suggests a shared experience of suffering and endurance. The natural world in *Beloved* is often a space of refuge and memory, as seen when Sethe, Denver, and Beloved visit the woods, a place that holds significance and memories for Sethe. The natural imagery in the novel often serves as a backdrop to the characters' emotional states and experiences, further linking them to the environment they inhabit.

Amy Denver's description of the chokecherry tree on Sethe's back turns its natural beauty to a bloody image caused by the schoolteacher and his boys after raping Sethe:

It's a tree, Lu. A chokecherry tree. See, here's the trunk—it's red and split wide open, full of sap, and this here's the parting for the branches. You got a mighty lot of branches. Leaves, too, look like, and dern if

these ain't blossoms. Tiny little cherry blossoms, just as white. Your back got a whole tree on it. In bloom. (Morrison, 2004, p. 79)

The chokecherry tree on Sethe's back in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* can be seen as a powerful intersection of the trauma of slavery and the representation of nature as both a witness to and a record of that trauma. The chokecherry tree, as described in the quote, is not an actual tree but a network of scars left by a brutal whipping—a physical manifestation of the violence inflicted upon Sethe's body. The vivid imagery of the "trunk" being "red and split wide open, full of sap" evokes the living, bleeding wounds that have marked Sethe's flesh. The scars have healed into a permanent reminder of her past, much like the way trees carry the history of their injuries in their bark and form.

In this context, the tree symbolizes the way the environment is inscribed with the violence of colonial histories. The natural imagery of branches, leaves, and blossoms contrasts sharply with the brutality that created them, suggesting a perverse intertwining of beauty and pain. The tree on Sethe's back becomes a site of memory, reflecting how the land itself remembers and bears the scars of colonial violence. Moreover, the tree is a symbol of resilience and survival. Despite the violence that created it, the tree is "in bloom," suggesting life, growth, and the possibility of renewal. This mirrors the resilience of colonized peoples and the natural world, both of which endure and persist despite the attempts to control and exploit them.

The ecocritical aspect of this analysis also considers how the natural world is not just a backdrop to human actions but an active participant in the narrative. The chokecherry tree on Sethe's back connects her to the environment, showing how her body and the land share a common history of suffering and resistance. It also serves as a metaphor for the way the environment is marked by human actions, particularly those of an oppressive and violent nature. Toni Morrison employs the chokecherry tree imagery on Sethe's back to subvert the othering of her character and to instill a sense of belonging that was systematically denied to her through the experiences of slavery and its aftermath. The chokecherry tree, a symbol etched into Sethe's skin, is a representation of her past traumas but also a testament to her survival and resistance. By transforming the grotesque scars into the image of a natural object, Morrison challenges the reader to see beyond the physical marks of violence and to recognize the humanity and history they represent. The tree is not just a record of pain but also a symbol of life and growth, which connects Sethe to the natural world and to a community that shares a collective history of suffering and endurance.

The natural world in *Beloved* often serves as a space where characters find solace and connection, as seen when Denver finds comfort in the creek and the presence of nature around 124. This connection to the environment is a way for Sethe to belong to something larger than herself, to be part of the cycle of life that the natural world embodies. The tree on her back, therefore, becomes a point of connection rather than alienation, linking her to the world around her and to the community that has experienced

similar traumas. Furthermore, the chokecherry tree imagery allows Sethe to reclaim her body and her story. Instead of allowing the scars to be a mark of shame or otherness, they become a complex symbol of her identity, one that encompasses both the pain of her past and her ability to survive and continue living. This act of reclamation is a powerful rejection of the dehumanization that slavery imposed upon her, affirming her sense of self and her place within a community that recognizes and shares her experiences. Morrison's use of the chokecherry tree imagery on Sethe's back serves to reject the othering of Sethe by transforming a mark of violence into a symbol of natural beauty, resistance, and connection. It allows Sethe to feel a sense of belonging to both the natural world and a community with a shared history, countering the isolation and dehumanization that were imposed upon her.

Toni Morrison's choice of a chokecherry tree to illustrate Sethe's experience is a deliberate and symbolic one. The chokecherry tree is native to North America and is known for its hardiness and ability to thrive in various conditions, much like Sethe's resilience in the face of the brutal conditions of slavery and its aftermath. The tree's name itself, "chokecherry," suggests a kind of suffocation or struggle to breathe, resonating with the suffocating oppression that Sethe endures. The bitterness of the chokecherry is a synonym of the bitterness of slavery, Hochman confirms:

The chokecherry tree's bitterness does not stop with the fruit. Its twigs have a disagreeable odor and taste, and its wilted leaves can poison animals. These aspects might allude to the bitterness of slavery, Sethe's whipping, for instance. Or perhaps the drawing (as in both figure drawing and drawing blood) of the cherry tree on Sethe's back connects to the "bitter" ink Sethe made from cherry gum, bitter because it was the same ink schoolteacher (the slavemaster) used to observe and "write her up" the day she was whipped. (Hochman, 1998, p. 95)

Moreover, the chokecherry tree bears fruit that is both bitter and astringent when raw, yet can be transformed into something sweet and nourishing when cooked, paralleling Sethe's own transformation and the potential for growth and sweetness in her life despite the bitterness of her past. The tree's blossoms, which are mentioned as being "just as white," could symbolize purity and the possibility of new beginnings, contrasting with the violence that the scars represent.

Additionally, the chokecherry tree has medicinal properties, and indigenous peoples have used it for healing purposes. This aspect of the tree could symbolize the potential for healing from the deep wounds of slavery, both physical and emotional, that Sethe carries. The tree on Sethe's back, therefore, is not just a record of her pain but also a symbol of her complex journey towards healing and the duality of her experiences. Morrison's use of the chokecherry tree rather than another type of tree is a nuanced choice that encapsulates the themes of resilience, transformation, and healing that are central to Sethe's character and story.

Exploring Otherness in Toni Morrison's "Beloved": A Postcolonial Ecocritical Perspective

The wounds on Sethe's back, inflicted by the white schoolteacher, serve as a physical and symbolic representation of the collective trauma experienced by the Black community during the era of slavery. These scars are not merely individual marks; they are a testament to the shared history of torture, pain, and dehumanization that Black people endured under the institution of slavery which is described by Roger Lockhurst as an "active disorganization of [the] community" (Lockhurst, 1996, p. 245). Sethe's back becomes a canvas that illustrates the broader narrative of slavery's brutality. The description of her scars as a "chokecherry tree" with intricate branches is a metaphor for the complex and interwoven stories of suffering that each enslaved person carries. The tree's "wide trunk and intricate branches" can be seen as a symbol of the deep-rooted and pervasive nature of the violence that was systematically inflicted upon enslaved individuals and the way it branched into every aspect of their lives.

Moreover, the fact that Sethe's wounds are a result of her attempt to claim ownership of her own body—specifically, her milk, which was meant for her children—highlights the denial of agency and the commodification of Black bodies during slavery. The theft of her milk is emblematic of the broader theft of autonomy and the forced separation of families, a common and devastating aspect of the slave experience. The shared recognition of Sethe's pain by other characters in the novel, such as Paul D, who is moved to tears upon seeing her scars, underscores the collective empathy and understanding within the Black community. His reaction is a moment of communal mourning and acknowledgment of the past that many were forced to endure. The wounds on Sethe's back are a microcosm of the wounds of an entire community. They are a reminder of the past that continues to haunt the present, a past that is inscribed on the bodies and in the memories of those who lived through it and their descendants. Morrison's depiction of Sethe's scars serves as a powerful symbol of the enduring impact of slavery and the shared history of resilience and survival within the Black community.

Trees in *Beloved* carry multifaceted symbolism that reflects the characters' complex relationships with nature, their past, and their identities. For Paul D, trees represent a path to freedom and a source of comfort. For Paul D, the trees "signal his passage from symbolic death to symbolic life; being active catalysts of his spiritual rebirth, they are shown to have a creative force of their own, the faculty of generating the life that goes with freedom" (Bonnet, 1997, p. 50). The advice he receives from the Cherokee to follow the blossoming trees to safety is emblematic of an indigenous connection to the land and a deep understanding of the natural world as a guide and protector. "Afterward, after the Cherokee pointed and sent him running toward blossom" (Morrison, 2004, p. 221). This advice also signifies a moment of cross-cultural solidarity and shared resistance against the oppressive structures of colonialism and slavery.

Paul D's perception of trees as comforting and protective contrasts sharply with Sethe's chokecherry tree, which is a manifestation of her physical and psychological scars from slavery. While Paul D's trees are associated with freedom and the possibility of a new beginning, Sethe's chokecherry

tree is a constant reminder of her trauma and the violence inflicted upon her body. The chokecherry tree on Sethe's back is not a natural tree but a representation of the brutality of her white schoolteacher master, who "made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree" (Morrison, 2004, p. 17). This tree is a symbol of the past that continues to live within her, a past that is both personal and shared by the Black community as a collective memory of slavery's horrors.

The divergent symbolism of trees for Paul D and Sethe illustrates the complex ways in which nature is intertwined with the characters' experiences of enslavement and their journeys toward healing and self-definition. While Paul D finds guidance and solace in the natural world, Sethe's relationship with it is more ambivalent, marked by the trauma that has been inscribed on her body in the form of the chokecherry tree. Furthermore, the indigenous wisdom that aids Paul D contrasts with the violent imposition of the chokecherry tree on Sethe, suggesting a dichotomy between a harmonious relationship with the land and a violent, extractive one.

The trees in *Beloved* serve as powerful symbols that reflect the characters' inner lives and histories. Paul D's trees offer a sense of hope and direction, while Sethe's chokecherry tree represents the indelible scars of her past trauma. The contrasting symbolism of trees in the novel underscores the complex and varied ways individuals cope with the legacy of slavery and seek paths toward healing. Paul D's association with trees as a guide to freedom and a source of solace contrasts with the chokecherry tree's embodiment of Sethe's suffering and the collective pain of the Black community. Through these natural elements, Morrison weaves a narrative that explores the deep connections between people, their environment, and the enduring impact of historical atrocities on their lives and identities.

Denver's relationship with the trees in the meadow, where Baby Suggs used to preach, is one of intimacy and trust. The trees are silent witnesses to her innermost fears and desires, offering a sense of security and privacy that she cannot find within the human community. This connection to the trees as keepers of secrets aligns with a broader theme in postcolonial literature, where the natural environment often becomes a space of refuge and resistance against the oppressive forces of colonialism:

In these woods, between the field and the stream, hidden by post oaks, five boxwood bushes, planted in a ring, had started stretching toward each other four feet off the ground to form a round, empty room seven feet high, its walls fifty inches of murmuring leaves. (Morrison, 2004, p. 28)

The woods where Denver finds solace and secrecy can be seen as a representation of her search for identity and place within a world marked by the trauma of slavery and colonization. The natural space described here is one that has been shaped by human hands—evidenced by the planted boxwood bushes—but has also taken on a life of its own, growing into a secluded and protected "room". This

reflects the way colonized landscapes have been altered by human activity but still retain their own agency and power.

Denver's attachment to this environment is significant. The woods provide her with a space that is removed from the human world, a place where she can retreat and be enveloped by nature. The "murmuring leaves" suggest a sense of communication and life within the natural world that is separate from human language and understanding. This space is not just a physical refuge but also an emotional and psychological one, where Denver can connect with a world that is not defined by the oppressive structures of the society from which she descends. The formation of the boxwood bushes into a room also symbolizes the creation of a space that is uniquely Denver's, where she can cultivate her own sense of self, away from the influence of her family's painful history. The natural room is a place of growth, not just for the plants but for Denver herself, who is in the process of growing and stretching toward her own form of agency and self-definition, much like the bushes reaching out to each other.

Moreover, the environmental attachment Denver feels can be seen as a form of resistance to the dislocation and disconnection caused by slavery. By finding a place in the natural world that feels like her own, Denver is reclaiming a sense of belonging and connection to the land that was denied to her ancestors. The natural "room" becomes a symbol of potential healing and a testament to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of historical and ongoing environmental and social disruption. *Beloved* reflects Denver's environmental attachment as a space of refuge and identity formation. It highlights the importance of the natural world in providing a sanctuary from the legacies of colonialism and slavery, and it underscores the complex ways in which individuals form connections with the landscapes they inhabit, even those that have been shaped by oppressive histories.

Denver's trees, much like Paul D's, represent a form of solace and guidance. However, while Paul D's trees are associated with his physical journey to freedom and the advice he receives from the Cherokee to follow the blossoming trees, Denver's trees are more about emotional sanctuary and the containment of her personal struggles. They are a place where she can engage with her own thoughts and fears without judgment or consequence, reflecting a more introspective and psychological form of escape. In contrast, Sethe's chokecherry tree is a stark reminder of the physical and emotional scars left by slavery. It is not a source of comfort or guidance but a symbol of the violence inflicted upon her and, by extension, the collective suffering of enslaved people. The chokecherry tree is a grotesque distortion of the natural world, turned into a record of human cruelty rather than a source of shelter or direction.

4. CONCLUSION

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* masterfully subverts the concept of othering by fostering a profound sense of belonging through the characters' relationships with trees. This connection to the natural world serves as a grounding force, providing the characters with a sense of identity and place that counters the alienation and dehumanization experienced under slavery. For Sethe, the trees offer a connection to her children and her past. The "chokecherry tree" on her back, a network of scars from a brutal

whipping, is a physical manifestation of her history of pain and resilience. While the scars could be seen as a mark of otherness, they instead become a part of her identity that she carries with her, much like the trees that have withstood the test of time and adversity. Paul D's relationship with trees is rooted in guidance and hope. His recollection of the advice to follow the blossoming trees to freedom provides him with a sense of direction and purpose. The trees are not just markers on a path to liberation; they are companions and symbols of life's continuity and the possibility of new beginnings, integrating him into the natural cycle rather than setting him apart from it. Denver's connection to the natural world is perhaps the most intimate, as she finds solace and secrecy in the company of trees. The "emerald closet" she retreats to is a space of her own making, a sanctuary where she can nurture her inner life away from the scrutiny of the outside world. The trees here do not other her; instead, they embrace her, allowing her to forge a personal identity that is not defined by the trauma of her family's past.

Morrison's portrayal of these characters' relationships with trees is a testament to their belonging to the world around them. The trees stand as silent witnesses to their histories, offering a sense of continuity and presence that counters the fragmentation and displacement caused by slavery. Through these natural connections, Morrison affirms the characters' place in the world, grounding them in a shared environment that acknowledges their experiences and validates their existence. The trees in *Beloved* thus carry different meanings for each character, but they are all connected by the theme of nature as a repository for the past. For Denver, the trees are a personal confidant, for Paul D, a guide to liberation, and for Sethe, a map of her pain. Each character's interaction with the trees reflects their individual coping mechanisms and their attempts to navigate a world shaped by the legacy of slavery. The trees stand as silent observers to the characters' struggles, embodying the resilience of nature and its capacity to hold the stories of those who seek solace within it.

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