

## THE ECO AND PSYCHE IN TONI MORRISON'S *A MERCY*

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**ABSTRACT:** *In A Mercy (2008), Toni Morrison extrapolates from her usual concern for the "peripheral existence" of the black community and probes into the aftermath of displacement, dislocation and "ontological instability" of the natives, indentured servants and the slaves –black, brown or white- in a "dominion" ruled by the newly formed gentry class of the 'New lands'- America. Apart from the issues related to physical/ geographical dislocations, the novel docket the cause and effect of imbalances - mental, emotional and psychological – stirred up by the extreme climatic conditions in the "wilderness" of America in the mid-seventeenth century. In this paper, I suggest that the ecology of these regions play an important role in affecting the psyche of the inhabitants. Inversely, the psychic states of the powerful and the powerless contribute, and to an extent, shape/influence the ecological patterns of the regions they inhabit. In order to understand the dynamics of the relationship between the two, I wish to read the novel in the light of a few selected principles of ecopsychology, chiefly the ecological ego and unconscious, and biophilia.*

**KEYWORDS:** Ecopsychology, Eco-ego, Eco-unconsciousness, Wilderness, Therapy and healing.

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### INTRODUCTION

In one of her interviews, Toni Morrison commented on the ambivalent nature of good and evil, "Sometimes good looks like evil; sometimes evil looks like good, you never really know what it is" (quoted in Tessa Roynon, 2011, 596). Morrison's statement here, seems to rest upon the Hegelian precept of "dialectics" because most of her novels seem to ponder over the innate contradictions in her characters that metamorphose or evolve them into what can be termed as "others." This metamorphosis at times, takes place as a result of what Kim Connor terms as "the reconciliation of ostensible paradoxes"(2003, webpage). *A Mercy* (2008), her ninth novel is no exception to it. Although labeled by her critics as a feminist writer, she has always objected to such "positions that are closed" and admits she has given "equitable access and opening doors to all sorts of things (*Toni Morrison: Conversations*, 2008, 140). If "good" and "evil" co-exist in her personae (and for that matter in the lap of nature, too), so do the agents of patriarchy as well as matriarchy because what she prefers in her writings is "leaving the endings open for reinterpretation, revisitation, [and] a little ambiguity" (*Conversations*, 2008, 140). It is up to the reader/critic not only to read in-between the lines of her novels but also enter into the pits of the "silences," "dreams" and "words" in the "telling[s]" or "confessions" of her men and women. Equally important is to read and map the landscapes, "wilderness" and "the world" whose "newness trembles" them (*A Mercy*, 1-3). Following this hypothesis, this paper aims to build up an argument that *A Mercy* makes an interesting reading from the point of view of two different yet, to some extent, collated areas of studies- ecology and psychology. The novel indeed offers its readers/critics a vantage point from where they could embark on a journey into the interiors of its locations –"across the trail through the beech and white pine" in the "wilderness" of the Virginia in the seventeenth century- the province of an "ad hoc" country, still in a state of "fluid" (*A Mercy*,

11). Nonetheless, this journey also takes into account the explorations into the psyche and emotional realms of each of the Morrison personae. If Lina, the native girl undergoes a transformation from being a “heathen” to “Christian[...]” (50-51), Florens, the central figure in the novel undergoes a horrible transformation from being a human/woman to “becom[ing] wilderness” (159).

## THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Despite the fact that a large number of studies have been carried out in the field of ecopsychology, it has been frequently defined by theorists as a “loosely defined paradigm.” However, the truth remains that it does enjoy a “[...]sustained relevance for the environmentally focused psychologies” (Tristan L. Snell et al 1). With the publication of Theodore Roszak’s book *The Voice of the Earth* in 1992, the seeds were sown of what was going to be established as a therapeutic science. Eventually, it took eco-criticism, ecofeminism, linguistics and many other disciplines with itself and emerged as an empirical science for the social scientists interested in the cause of human development. Roszak makes a heralding statement in *The Voice of the Earth* :

We need a new discipline that sees the needs of the planet and the person as a continuum and that can help us reconnect with the truth that lies in our communion with the rest of creation (quoted in the webpage of Carl Golden [www.soulcraft.com](http://www.soulcraft.com)).

Essentially, the need for a “continuum” and “communion” of humankind and nature is the starting point of ecopsychological studies. In her thesis entitled *Wild at Heart: Creating Relationship with Nature*, Sylvie Shaw offers a working definition of the term Ecopsychology that says, it is :

[...] concerned with healing the human-nature relationship. It grew out of a critique of mainstream psychology which was seen to focus too narrowly on human relationships and overlook the role nature plays in shaping human identity (9)

While quoting Sarah Conn from *Women of Power* (1991), Shaw further states that the conventional psychological therapies generally seek to heal relationships between the self, family and society whereas ecopsychology seeks to heal the disconnection between the self and the natural world as well. It recognizes that feelings of pain and suffering are not only personal problems but are connected to the larger social, political and cultural forces in which they are embedded. When the health of the earth deteriorates, human health also suffers. Ecopsychology attempts to reverse this suffering by helping people forge the link between their own feelings of alienation and the wider human alienation from nature. In this way people can begin to make the connection between caring for themselves and caring for the earth (Shaw 10).

To understand the ecopsychological pattern and system of events in this Morrison novel, it is inevitable not to ignore the socio-political or socio-historical impact that the novel carries in its making. The seventeenth century evidently stands in the world history as a period of scientific revolution, political changes and philosophical/ideological rethinking, marking it as an age of transition for many established as well as upcoming nations of the world. Seafaring and navigational explorations accelerated the greed of grabbing and acquiring lands, especially in poorly inhabited regions on the world political map- the map that kept changing

its contours during each decade of that age. The references in *A Mercy* to the early Swedish and Dutch explorers followed by a British Company's control in Maryland versus the Papist Portugal dominance in Virginia serve as a socio-historical and to a larger extent, a geo-political account of the newly inhabited lands in America. Racism and slavery were still not synonymous with each other and where, as stated by Morrison in an interview, "all sorts of people were coming" ("Morrison Discusses") to breathe "[the] air of a world so new, almost alarming in rawness and temptation" and explore or master the "forests untouched since Noah"

(*A Mercy*, 10).

The present essay hereafter, continues to be read from four the following focal points :The ecological unconscious and ego, biophilia, wilderness vs. humanness, and nature and woman:

#### The Ecological Unconsciousness and Ego

In his essay "The Voice of the Earth: Discovering the Ecological Ego," Theodore Roszak uses the term "ecological unconscious" (*Trumpeter*, 1992) for the human state of oblivion and alienation from the cosmic whole. Following the Freudian principle of the repressed sexual and aggressive drives of the unconscious mind, Roszak propounds that the "ozone depletion, toxic waste, and the greenhouse effect [and other] environmental problems have become the psychopathology of our everyday life." At this level, he opines:

[The] ecopsychologists discover a repression that weights upon our inherited sense of loyalty to the planet that mothered the human mind into existence. If psychosis is the attempt to live a lie, our psychosis is the lie of believing we have no ethical obligation to our planetary home. ( *Trumpeter*, 1992)

The process of colonizing and that of being colonized in the regions falling under what Morrison herself terms as "critical geography" (*Playing in the Dark*, 1992, 3) is traumatically challenging for both the agencies in Virginia. The plight of the early settlers is as traumatic as (if not less than), that of the savages startled by the presence of the "Europes" in their land. Virginia, in 1682 was a "mess" (*A Mercy*, 9) with its disorganized world grounded for the "pitched battles for God, king and land"(9) suggesting the mayhem caused by the early explorers, trader, colonizers and missionaries. The acquisition of land by clearing parts of "wilderness" had a direct impact on the lives of the natives who have been transformed into what Jacob Vaark in the novel terms as the "felon[s], "runaways" or "starving deserter[s]" (9). Forced to uproot themselves from their dwellings, the natives are left with no other option but to "cower in a hollow" or hid "behind the felled trees" (10) in the colonized regions.

Labeled by the Presbyterians as the "impoverished gentry," the native menfolk who "simply fished and hunted like gentry all day long," are considered to be "entitled paupers" who "owned nothing, certainly not the land they slept on"(45). Land, and for that matter, nature too, for the natives, are not commodifying but connecting elements; connecting a man with the "earth's soul"( 52). The arrival of the "Europes" in the land of the "primary peoples" brought with them a new 'dull imaginative god" that had no sermons or preaching for their practice of what the natives condemn as the act of "eat[ing] the land." Killing trees and shipping them off to faraway countries, ruining soil, fencing land and turning fertile lands into barren ones were never a part of the lives of the natives. In fact, they bore strong beliefs

about these activities as the ones that made man “cut loose from the earth’s soul.” But for “Europes,” these practices were inevitably “a way to be in the [new] world” (52).

Roszak’s theory of “ecological unconscious” takes into account the connection between the “macrocosm” and “microcosm.” He borrows the terms from the alchemists of the ancient world in which he finds a connection between the celestial intelligence (macrocosm) and the inner being of the man (microcosm). The disconnection or disjunct between the two is found in Jacob Vaark’s attempts to “bring nature under his control.” From Lina’s native point of view, Vaark’s greed for making the third and presumably, the final house “that required “the death of fifty trees” was an act of “stir[ring] malfortune.” With all her confounding reactions to the “Europes,” she calls it a “foolish house” (43). As against the preserving and conservational consumption habits of the natives, the consumption habits of the “Europes” initially terrify her and eventually puzzle her. Vaark’s illness followed by his death before the completion of the house is justified by her as, “Sure enough when the house was close to completion he fell sick with nothing else in his mind.” (42).

Ironically, while the God of the “Europes” hated the native habit of “staring off into space”, a sign of “idleness” and “damnation” (42), Vaark has been “staring at the sky” when disturbed by the unpredictable climatic imbalances - “fourteen days of rain and fifty-five of none-” wondering in despair at “the land’s refusal to obey his will.” Impatient, loner and to an extent asocial before the arrival of Rebekka, he was “[...] forever unprepared for violent, mocking changes in the weather [...]” (47). Regardless, Vaark’s indomitable will and determination to conquer the land was indefatigable, making him more experienced and confident than ever before. He emerges from being a “poor farmer” to a man of “pride” and ultimately (along with Rebekka, his wife) chooses to drift away from the clan. The couple’s so called “honest free-thinking lives” produced “a selfish privacy and they had lost the refuge and the consolation of a clan” making them over-confident of their “judgment” that “they needed only themselves”(56). The gradual transformation culminated with Vaark turning into an authoritarian figure on the farm whose dictatorial stand was similar to that of the traveler in the native folk story of the eagle and her eggs, narrated by Lina to Florens.

The folk story stands as an apologue of nature and civilization in which the eagle and her eggs stand for nature and her elements and the traveler for man’s exploitative consumption habits leading to destruction and imbalance on the planet. The echoing of the phrase “This is perfect . This is mine” is reiterated with a sinister laugh by the traveler upon seeing “the turquoise lake, the eternal hemlocks, the starlings sailing into clouds cut by rainbow [...], booming like thunder into valleys, over acres of primroses and mallow” (60). The echoes destroy the harmonious, peaceful world of the non-human creatures making them wonder at the sound - “what it means” (60). As against these sinister echoes are the sounds of the eagle’s fluttering in ignorance “to find the source of the strange, meaningless thunder, the incomprehensible sound”(61). The end of the story is yet, another example of man’s exploitation of natural resources implied by the never ending “fall[ing] forever ” of the eagle after being smitten by the traveler (61) suggesting the lurking danger of life on the planet. Vaark’s death before moving into his new mansion, then, is an example of what Marc C. Conner, rightly terms as, of “creation, dominion, [and] damnation” (“The Language and Landscape of *A Mercy*,” 1997, 151).

Enlisting the scope and functions of the ecopsychologists in her essay “Ecopsychology: Connecting Our Mental Health To Our Environmental Behavior,” Catherine Honor Kineavy points out:

Ecopsychologists believe that our destructive environmental behaviors stem from our sense of disconnection to the natural world. They contend that we have an "ecological unconscious" that is repressed in some individuals. This ecological unconscious is our connection to our evolution on earth. In other words, if we recover our sense of connection to our natural world, we will begin to be more environmentally conscious people (1997).

For the native girl Lina, ecoconsciousness is a way of life that encompasses her personal, cultural, functional as well as spiritual needs. Despite the conversion by the Presbyterians, the native girl Lina's dilemma of simultaneously being in both the worlds - "in the world" of "Europes" as well as in the "natural world" spread "within the village and in the forest beyond"- finds a solution in her therapeutic retreat to nature where "[she] cawed with birds, chatted with plants, spoke to squirrels, sang to the cow and opened her mouth to rain" (46-47). It is she who identifies the signs of what environmentalists term as "ecocide" in Vaark's efforts of "killing fifty trees" to build the third house. She strongly feels, "There was no need for a third" (41). Lina's native jargon for the cutting of trees as "killing," "death" and "killing trees without asking for their permission" are volatile signs of constantly being in a state of "ecological ego," the term that Roszak uses for "[e]thical responsibility to the planet" (1992). Her native habits "bathing naked in the river," "plucking cherries from a tree burdened with them," "eat[ing] corn mush with [...] finger" and "covering [...] in the skin of beasts"- are despised by the "settlers" as acts of sin, theft, perverse and offence to God. Caught in the conflict between the "heathen" and the "worthies," she chooses to surrender quietly to the cosmetic operations carried out on her by the Presbyterians in the form of burning her deerskin dress and making her wear a duffel cloth, a sign of ushering her into the erstwhile entry to the world of machines and manufacturing. The acts of "clip[ping] beads from her arms and scissor[ing] inches from her hair"(46) puzzle her as they initiate into the act of "purify[ing]" her to the extent of learning their language and forgetting her own. Essentially, it is neither these cosmetic operations nor the horrendous sight of hundreds of her people dying because of the black death epidemic that leaves so much an adverse effect on her mind but it is the "conflagration" lit by the European soldiers (to sterilize the land contaminated by the epidemic) that "ate" everything that she loved:

Memories of her village peopled by the dead turned slowly to ash and in their place a single image arose. Fire. How quick. How purposefully it ate what had been built, what had been life. Cleansing somehow and scandalous in beauty. Even before a single hearth or encouraging a flame to boil water she felt a sweet tinge of agitation (47).

The same kind of agitation is experienced by Lina upon the arrival of Sorrow, the enigmatic woman- "accepted, not bought" - by Vaark. Sorrow's "mongrelized" background and her "Twin" personality or her alter-ego (making her oscillate between the state of memory and oblivion) make Lina believe that she is a "natural curse" in whose presence 'no good could come'(53). Thus, "corruption" (53) - natural or psychological - hurts Lina's ecopsychological stance contributing to her "savage nonsenses" that Rebekka continuously ignores or rebukes her for.

## Biophilia

James Braxton Peterson's essay "Eco-critical Focal Points: Narrative Structure and Environmentalist Perspectives in Morrison's *A Mercy*" explores various focal points - ("hypothetical focalizations")- from where the characters and the narrators unfold their first/third-person narrations while interweaving the personal with the historical, geographical, psychological and environmental. (Peterson, 6). Apart from the "cartographic" representation of the Abenaki and Lenape trails across which Morrison's characters traverse, the navigational accounts of the sea also become a contributing part of the narrative. Rebekka's affinity and babbles with the sea with whom she confides typify the biophilic tendency, one of the major ecopsychological insights, that a woman shares with the sea that is "free from the twin dominators of men and land. Rebekka feels safer in the arms of the sea which is neither male nor land" (Conner, 1997, 160) than the streets of London that she had left behind, following Vaark's placing an order for a "mail – ordered wife." Having undergone the ordeal of being both "mesmerized and bored by the look of it," Rebekka finds in the sea, a newly found companion and confidante with whom she talks, "Stay still, don't hurtle me. No. Move., move, excite me. Trust me, I will keep your secrets; that the smell of you is like fresh monthly [blood]" (*A Mercy* 71). Her temporary bond with the sea, her inmates and the memories associated with them later on flash in her hallucinations that occurred during the fever cause by the small pox. The state of "unconscious –not asleep" (71) drives her "thoughts [to bleed] into one another, confusing events and time but not people" (70) making the sea and all other women on the ship that she took to land in America become an integral part of her existence.

It is not only the sea, but subsequently, the "new unseen world" also that enchants her:

Rain itself became a brand-new thing: clean, sootless water falling from the sky. She clasped her hands under his chin gazing at trees taller than a cathedral, wood for warmth so plentiful it made her laugh, then weep, for her brothers and the children freezing in the city she had left behind. She had never seen birds like these, or tasted fresh water that ran over visible white stones (74).

She willingly compromises with the "land of such space and perfume" of the "fresh and new England" (88) over a period of time, making her feel more and more repelled by the "reeking streets, spat on by lords and prostitutes curtseying, curtseying, curtseying" (75) in London before her marriage to Vaark. Whether it was the issue of "religious matters," "a mighty settlers-versus-natives war," "bad weather" or "squabbles between the local tribes," none of them matched "the gore" of what she had seen since childhood in the city where she was brought up. The barbaric customs of witch burning, mutilating felons and the "sale" of daughters for the want of dowry in the so called civilized Europe during the seventeenth century were found to be more "repellent" by her in comparison to what she was prepared by her mother as "the land of savages [...] America" (74-75). And therefore, for her the new life of farming was "more of an adventure than drudgery"(51). Eventually when Vaark dies and she is affected by small pox, she shares her sorrow with the "forest of beech"(57) with whom she "often" conversed, "You and I, this land is our home," she whispered, but unlike you I am exile here"(57). The sense of belongingness to the land gets disconnected because of her mental agony arising out of multiple conditions: loneliness caused due to her widowhood and childlessness; the suffering because of small pox; and her chosen dismemberment from the social circles in the village.

As against his attempts to master land and nature, Vaark's compassion for the animals and his strong hesitation in accepting Florens as a slave for the recovery of his debt- "Flesh was not his commodity"(20) - stand for the deep psychoemotional bonding that he shares with the anima mundi. In the beginning of the novel, the reader encounters two instances that vouch for his love for all the living beings on the earth. The first instance being the one in which he frees the young one of a raccoon stuck in a tree break, and the second being the one where he detests a man beating a horse to its knees. We are introduced to the character of Vaark with the lines, "Few things angered Jacob more than the brutal handling of domesticated animals"(26). Despite the fact that he wants to conquer the "wilderness" of the Milton homestead, of which, he is the master, he does not intend to create D'Ortega's "vain voluptuous" Jubilio. Tessa Roynon compares both the households –Jubilio and the Milton homestead – to Satan's "infernal palace." In her essay "Her Dark Materials: John Milton, Toni Morrison, and Concepts of "Dominion" in *A Mercy*," she suggests:

While the significance of houses and homes is a time-honored theme for this author, in *A Mercy* she implies distinctive parallels between Pandemonium, the infernal palace that Satan constructs in Book I of *Paradise Lost*, and both the palatial Jubilio and Vaark's ill-fated dominion (600).

In his "ill-fated dominion" however, Sorrow, the girl with the "natural curse"(53) and Florens, the girl without "protection" in the Jubilio are blessed with the "mercy" of being treated as a "human child" and "not pieces" (164) of a human anatomy. And therefore, the "minha mãe" justifies her act of giving away Florens to Vaark in the last part of the novel by saying, "there was no animal in his heart. He never looked at me the way Senhor does. He did not want"(161).

In his book *Biophilia*, E.O. Wilson formulates the biophilia- hypothesis wherein he begins with the premise that there is an innate and genetically determined affinity of human beings with all other living organisms on the earth (1984). Although the term was founded by Erich Fromm in 1973 in his psychoanalytical study *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, Wilson carried out a detailed study of the subject in which he suggests that the "symbolic use of nature in human language and the pervasiveness of spiritual reverence for animals and nature in human cultures worldwide are [...] sources of evidence for biophilia"( Kara Rogers, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*). The "widespread affiliations with natural metaphors appear to be rooted in the evolutionary history of the human species"(Rogers). Florens' biophilic connection with the world around her is shattered during her childhood, when she is ostensibly abandoned by her mother. In Roszak's philosophy, "[The] enchanted sense of the world" of a child, upon being controlled and directed by the adult intervention often results into "repress[ing] the innate animism of children" which leads to the "alienation between the person and the natural environment" (*Trumpeter*,1992). Her doubts and apprehensions for "minha mãe" ( *A Mercy*,1) are expressed in the beginning, and repeatedly thereafter, at various instances till the reader finds an explanation for it in the last part of the novel. The first person narration of Florens' mother, justifying her decision of choosing her nursing "baby boy" over Florens for handing her over to Jacob Vaark, comes to the reader and not to Florens. And so for Florens, her prejudice and contempt for "minha mãe" result into a constant mental state of "worry" and "scare:

But I have a worry. [...] but because mothers nursing greedy babies scare me. I know how their eyes go when they choose. How they raise them to look at me hard, saying something I cannot hear. Saying something important to me, but holding the little boy's hand" (6).

Her constant craving – “[the]Mother hunger - to [...] have one” (61) - for the presence of a mother figure finds a manifestation in varied forms in three different situations where she witnesses the instances of parental love. With the ostensible hatred that she pours out against the ““minha mãe” in all her serious broodings, there is a strong urge to have a mother giving her advice as Widow Ealing does to Daughter Jane- “ If my mother is not dead she can be teaching me these things”(107) The second instance is the cynical feeling Florens experiences when she sees the little girl screaming and hiding behind her mother’s skirt upon seeing Florens’ black body at Widow Ealing’s house. The third instance is that of jealousy that she experiences at the blacksmith’s house upon seeing his foundling Malaik. Thus, it is the denial of motherly love and the feelings of being betrayed by the mother that rules her psyche which ultimately drives her, in the blacksmith’s words, to the state of “wilderness” resorting to violence and the everlasting “sadness.” (159). Simultaneously, it also creates a communication crisis that could never be solved because of their physical distance –“That all this time I cannot know what my mother is telling me. Nor can she know what I am wanting to tell her” (159).

Eventually, it is this feeling of discontent followed by grudge she bore for the “baby boy” of “minha mãe” that gets transferred to Malaik. The blacksmith is as protective for Malaik as the “minha mãe” is for her baby boy. Both, the “minha mãe” and the blacksmith choose Malaik and the baby boy, respectively over Florens- “when I wake a “minha mãe” is standing by your [the blacksmith’s] cot and this time her baby boy is Malaik. He is holding her hand”(136). Thus, the feeling of being an “expel” is twice experienced by Florens.

#### Wilderness Vs. Humanness

In contrast to Lina’s “psychic need for wilderness” (Roszak, 1992) that serves as a therapy for resolving her state of psychosis during the post-conflagration phase, the blacksmith uses the term “wilderness” in a negative connotation so far as Florens is concerned. He associates the term with the denial of “freedom” and the self-imposition of “slavery.” For him the one with “no constraint” and “no mind” is a “slave by choice” and such a person stands for “wilderness.” Florens response to his assertive statement –“ You are nothing but wilderness. No constraint. No mind” (139)- results into a violence that she inflicts upon him for his rejection of hers. The sexual intimacy that they shared at the Milton homestead bears no consequence to the impulsive negative opinion that he forms for her when he finds Malaik bleeding upon his return. His biased expulsion of Florens “cuts” and leaves her “dying inside” (139-140). However, towards the end, her “telling[s]” in the form of “carving letters”(158) with a nail on the wall act as a therapy, that ultimately leads her to unconditionally accept her “wilderness,” the one that leads her to be “free” from the chains of lust and emotional slavery or dependence. Ironically, both the loved ones who reject her – the blacksmith as well as the – frown at her being “wild” and “dangerous.” Her acceptance of being both –“wild” and “dangerous” in fact liberates her from “pain,” “misery” and “shock.” Towards the end, she speaks in their invisible presence, “See? You are correct. A “minha mãe” too. I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven, Unforgiving. No ruth, my love. None. Hear me? Slave. Free. I last”(159). Thus, her journey, in the words of Stefanie Mueller from being a “hatchling[...] to eagle-mother” establishes “her recognition of this dichotomy as the fundamental contradiction of her self” (Mueller 84).

#### Nature and Woman

Karen J Warren identifies eight types of connections that the ecofeminists deal with in their studies. In her “Introduction” to *The Twin Dominations of Women and Nature*, she refers to

the symbolic connection between nature and woman. Since ecofeminism “feminizes nature and naturalizes woman” (1993, 255), one of the major focus of the ecofeminist critics thrusts on drawing parallels between the atrocities they undergo in a given society or environment controlled by the patriarchal forces. In *A Mercy*, both the entities- nature and woman- are ostracized by “The evil thoughts of men” (60). Morrison unfolds the psychological state of each female characters by applying the technique of “multiple narrations.” Although the central focus is on Florens, whose narration is in first person, the other women in the novel are given sufficient weightage in terms of unfolding the “secrets” of their minds barring the case of “minha mãe” who like Florens, has been given the privilege of expressing herself in the first person narrative. So what happens is the narration of events in *A Mercy* at times, seems to be overlapping but is actually circumscribed by the perspectival or personal response of those characters.

The use of nature metaphors deployed for the women in the novel and vice versa intensify the gravity of their exploitation by men. That land and women should belong to or be in possession of men is the way the patriarchal world perceives the social order. The virginity of land/ woman as perceived by Lina is in danger; her native fear of them getting exploited or abused is a recurring major concern for her as seen in her regret: “Florens had been a quiet, timid version of herself at the time of her own displacement. Before destruction. Before sin. Before men” (59). Being protective and caring, she had warned Florens, “You are one leaf on [the blacksmith’s] tree” to which she impulsively responded “No. I am his tree.” Unfortunately, the “tree” is uprooted resulting into Florens admitting, “I need Lina to say how to shelter in wilderness” (40). Lina’s metonymical words for Florens such as “lamb”(100), hatchling of the eagle or a leaf that stand or innocence are further annotated by Florens’ herself when she feels humiliated, helpless and all alone after leaving Widow Ealing’s house. The “Europeans” will consider her to be human only after they would read Rebekka’s letter- a European mistress’ letter. She laments, “Without it I am a weak calf abandoned by the herd, a turtle without shell, a minion with no tell tale signs but a darkness I an born with , outside, yes but inside as well and the inside dark is small, feathered and toothy” (113). Actually, in the beginning of the novel, Florens compares herself with supposedly a wounded bird-“but I will never again unfold my limbs to rise up and bare teeth”(1). Her transformation from “have me always” to “don’t touch me ever” after the blacksmith hit her for Malaik is metaphorized by Florens as the bird with “feathers lifting” and “the claws scrath[ed] and scrath[ed]” (140) till “the feathers close” (156) and she lives his house, vanquished and lost.

In a very crude, vulgar manner, the conversation that takes place at the alehouse, Barbados known for its rich sugar plantations in the seventeenth century and “steady profits [of] five times the investment”(29) is derogatively compared by Peter Downes, a trader to a prostitute – “Like whore. Lush and deadly”(29). Downes calls it “ a stew of of mulattoes, creoles, zambos, mestizos, lobos, chios, coyotes [ being] produced in Barbados”( 29). One of the meanings of the word “stew” is also a brothel and the phrase “producing” these races indicate the illegitimacy of the indentured servants and slaves bought and sold in Barbados, and the kind of the culturally hybrid progeny they would beget there. Downes associates a morbid looseness to these mixed races multiplying in Barbados.

In an other instance where the “feminization of nature” takes place, the land on which Vaark’s farm stood faces the danger, as envisaged by Lina, of being “claimed by or auctioned off to the Baptists” because after his death, he “had no males on his property” (56). The status of Vaark’s land would be same as that of the three “unmastered women”- Sorrow, Lina and Florens- after who may become orphans in case of Rebekka’s death. Lina’s fear for all the

women on the farm is not totally unjustified. She knew, “None of them could inherit; none was attached to a church or recorded in its books. Female and illegal, they would be interlopers, squatters, if they stayed on after Mistress –[Rebekka]- died, subject to purchase, hire, assault, abduction, exile” (56). Willard and Scully, the European indentured servants on the farm also feel the need, rather a compulsion for their mistress to get married else, as Willard apprehends, “She’s a woman. How else keep the farm?”(143) Willard’s concern is the same as that of the Presbyterians who consider the land and woman to be a commodity to be “master[ed]” which, in turn, matches the contents of the sachem’s revised prophecy.

*A Mercy* ends on a note of sadness and bewilderment for Florens as well as for the “minha mãe.” The former is confounded and sad because of her inability to understand the words of *minha mãe*- “I will keep one sadness. That all this time I cannot know what my mother is telling me. Nor can she know what I am wanting to tell her”(159); and the latter is equally disturbed because she wants Florens “to understand what I know and long to tell you” (159). Another confusion that Florens faces is “What will I do with my nights, when the tellings stop” (159). Although she hopes in vain that the blacksmith will read her “careful words,” she wishes them to fly and experience “the air that is out in the world” (159). She knows they may “fall, fall like ash over acres of primrose and mallow”(159) suggesting that her voice will not be heard either by the blacksmith or others and will remain confined to the walls of Vaark’s house. But that does not deter her spirits of writing them on the wall till her story comes to an end. By the time, her story is over, she will certainly have “her soles of [her] feet, as hard as cypress” (159). The symbol of cypress that Florens mentions towards the end of the novel is prognostic of the “weeping” that will be a part of her life that she insinuates to the invisible listener in the beginning of her narration. Thus, the metaphor of “cypress” and “weeping [of Florens]” becomes synonymous with each other.

Susan Neal Mayberry suggests that there are traces of “visions and revisions of American masculinity in *A Mercy* (1997, 166). According to her, Jacob Vaark stands for what Morrison herself terms as “self-conscious but highly problematic construction of the American as a new white man” (quoted in Mayberry’s essay, 1997, 168). Further, she states that the “hardship [and] adventure” (*A Mercy*, 10), he undergoes or takes, are his attempts to begin “climbing his American ladder with three brick steps” (Mayberry, 169). The “three brick steps” (*A Mercy*, 13) he takes to transform himself from a “ratty orphan [to the becoming of a] landowner” are: his need for a “wife, [a] certain kind of mate: an unchurched woman of childbearing age, obedient but not groveling, literate but not proud, independent but nurturing and [ideal]” (18); his newly sprung belief, “What a man leaves behind is what a man is” (87); and his desire to build a house “befitting not a farmer, not even a trader but a squire”(86). And therefore, as Mayberry opines, Vaark decides to “establish a household of powerless outcasts- a cadre of subjugated women”(175)- Sorrow and Florens.

Vaark, despite possessing the basic qualities of nobility and generosity, gradually dives and floats on the troubled waters of the colonial greed of acquiring land, resources and wealth that would slowly open for him an entry to the world of the snobbish “gentry” class of “Europeans” in the new lands. While he represents the white patriarchal power class of “Europeans” as well as the “New lands,” the blacksmith emerges as the most dependable force for the Milton homestead after the death of Vaark. Lina banks for her own survival on the blacksmith’s cure for treating Rebekka’s small pox - “since her own life, everything, depended on Mistress’ survival, which depended on Florens’ success”(58) of bringing back the blacksmith. With all his ruthlessness and biased attitude, he is the one who is actually “an ass

in the skin of a lion” (158)- the quality that he abhorred in the slaves who are not “free men.” For Florens, the lion figure with a mane is not a “he” –the blacksmith- but the “she”- Daughter Jane - who risks her life to save Florens. The other male figures in the novel also stand for “the new white man’s uniquely American compulsion to control”(Mayberry, 183) to rule, exploit or rape the womenfolk and own, control and exploit the lands, forests and life on the earth.

## CONCLUSION

Connor borrows the term “geophany”(165) from the well known cartographer Tim Robinson and connects it to “theophany.” While the former term refers to the “manifestation of the earth,” the later stands for the “manifestation of god.” The intersection of both the domains is what Connors take up in his essay. For the present article, it would not be inappropriate to connect the term “geophany” with the feminist issues and thus, coin the term “genderphany” because Morrison does interweave the problematics of both the areas in *A Mercy* thereby, frequently indulging into verbal imbrications positing women and nature, side by side, in the multi-narratives told by the female personae. Not that Morrison’s concern restricts itself here. It expands further to array the aftereffects of their victimization which in turn also contributes to/ affects the male psyche. Thus, Morrison seems to commingle multiple issues related to gender, ecology and psychology in *A Mercy* which offers a chance to read the novel from an ecopsychological point of view. That Morrison uses various nature metaphors to enhance the various themes of the novel such as colonization, exploitation, subjugation of women and nature could make a separate study by itself based on the principles of cognitive linguistics. *A Mercy* has been read by critics from various viewpoints and will continue to be an interesting reading from the perspectives of many new upcoming critical theories. However, its plain reading from a narrative point of view would certainly remain a unique experience forever.

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