Nature as Witness: Environmental Trauma and Recovery in Morrison and Atwood's Fiction

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates in what way nature appears as an accessory or even as a sole determinant and witness to the trauma of the earth that reflects on the works of Toni Morrison and Margaret Atwood. This paper is in the context of reading ecocritical texts in Morrison's *Beloved* and The *Bluest Eye* and Atwood's *Surfacing* and *The Year of the Flood* to understand how the two authors connect ecological abuses with individual and communal traumas, especially on the suburbs. The author explores the parallel between landscape and psychological trauma, ecological destruction and social inequity and racial injustices, and how the landscape also forms a possible realm of healing and redemption. Based on the ecofeminist and social ecology approaches, the paper unveils that the nature in the stories functions beyond its symbolic representation; it is the one of the repositories of the memory, the one that absorbs violence and provides the means of the resistance. The article compares the ecological awareness of Morrison and Atwood in their fiction and sets the works within the world context of the environmental justice, gender issues, and postcolonial resilience.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Psychological, Healing, Oppression, Resistance, Trauma.

Introduction: Nature as Witness and Narrative Force

The literary delineation of trauma usually sets forth the environment as more than a backdrop. It turns into a mirror, a participant, a store of memory in some cases. This paper examines the role of nature as a witness of the environmental trauma and as the agent of healing by Toni Morrison and Margaret Atwood. In their novels *Beloved*, The *Bluest Eye*, *Surfacing*, and *The Year of the Flood*, both

authors challenge the subject of intricate interactions between environmental destruction, gender repression, racial abuse, and mental instabilities. They do not romanticize nature but place it as a multi-dimensional space where there are scars, silences, and narratives beyond human tragedies and survivors.

Ecocriticism, Ecofeminism, and Environmental Justice: Theoretical Framework

To dig deeper into these sections, it helps to look through a few important lenses. Ecocriticism asks us to notice how literature shapes our relationship with the world around us—what we value in nature, and how our stories about the environment shape our lives (Glotfelty and Fromm xx–xxi, 150–53). Ecofeminism, as thinkers like Greta Gaard and Val Plumwood describe it, draws attention to how women and the environment are often controlled and exploited in similar ways, especially under systems of patriarchy and colonialism (Glotfelty and Fromm xx–xxi, 153–55). Murray Bookchin's idea of social ecology challenges us to see how damage to the environment and social injustices—like racism or classism—are all woven together (Bookchin 27–29). In Morrison's work, we see how race and class affect everything from who gets to enjoy green spaces to who suffers from pollution and crumbling neighborhoods. Atwood's speculative fiction in *The Year of the Flood* imagines societies in crisis, using scenes of environmental disaster to question greed, inequality, and the way we treat both women and the land (234). Through their writing, both authors encourage us to step back from seeing ourselves as the center of the universe and instead begin to listen to nature's own voice acknowledging it as a participant in sections of trauma and, perhaps, recovery.

Landscapes of Loss: Environmental Trauma in Morrison's *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye*

In *Beloved*, Sweet Home's pastoral façade conceals a brutal history of enslavement. The natural world—trees, soil, even the air—absorbs the pain of Black bodies. Sethe's trauma is reflected in the "chokecherry tree" on her back, a metaphorical scar formed from whipping. As she explains, "the trees were inviting… until they weren't" (Morrison 25). The environment shifts from refuge to menace, echoing the instability of freedom and memory.

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison critiques environmental racism by situating Pecola Breedlove's family in a decaying urban neighborhood. The soil where Pecola plants her marigolds is infertile, symbolizing the social toxicity that destroys Black girlhood. Morrison writes, "the land was barren, and the seeds shriveled" (5). Nature's inability to nurture reflects a systemic failure to protect vulnerable lives.

Atwood's Eco-dystopias: Witnessing Collapse in *Surfacing* and *The Year of the Flood*

Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (1972) portrays a woman's return to the Canadian wilderness as both a physical and psychological excavation. As she reconnects with the forest and lake, she peels back layers of colonial and patriarchal trauma. Her descent into near-feral behavior is not madness but a stripping away of social constructs—a return to an ecological self that exists outside of imposed structures (Atwood 143).

The Year of the Flood envisions a post-apocalyptic world shaped by bioengineering, corporate control, and environmental catastrophe. Here, the remnants of natural life act as witnesses to human hubris. The eco-religious group, God's Gardeners, preserves seeds and knowledge as sacred relics. Atwood's fiction foregrounds how environmental collapse stems not from nature's cruelty but from humanity's ethical failure.

Gendered Ecologies: Women, Nature, and Oppression

Both Morrison and Atwood position women as deeply entwined with nature—often through imposed associations that reduce them to reproductive or nurturing roles. However, they subvert these essentialist views by revealing how patriarchal structures exploit both women and the earth. In *Beloved*, Sethe's maternal instinct leads to the ultimate transgression: the killing of her child. Nature does not judge; instead, it bears silent witness.

In *Surfacing*, the female protagonist's encounter with nature becomes a space for recovering autonomy. She refuses language, clothing, and rationality—tools of patriarchal civilization. Atwood

challenges the Cartesian split between mind and body, human and animal, suggesting that female subjectivity can only be reclaimed through embodied ecological immersion (Howells 52).

Memory and the Land: Nature as an Archive of Trauma

The idea that "the trees remember" is central to Morrison's environmental imagination. In *Beloved*, the past is not locked in human memory alone—it is inscribed on the land. When Sethe returns to 124 Bluestone Road, the house is haunted not only by a ghost but by history itself. The forest where she escaped becomes a liminal space, a witness to both survival and suffering (Morrison 93).

Similarly, Atwood's landscapes are not pristine wildernesses but palimpsests of memory. In *Surfacing*, the lake conceals her father's corpse, colonial violence, and buried truths. Nature becomes a site of both revelation and concealment, echoing Derrida's idea of the archive as both preservative and repressive (Derrida 12-13).

Narratives of Ecological Recovery and Resistance

Amid decay and trauma, both authors offer moments of ecological recovery. In *The Bluest Eye*, Claudia's act of planting marigold seeds, though unsuccessful, represents resistance—a belief in growth amidst ruin. In Morrison's *Beloved*, Sethe's eventual reconnection with Denver and Paul D suggests the possibility of healing, not by forgetting, but by acknowledging nature's role in trauma (Morrison 273). Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* ends with the survival of God's Gardeners and the rebirth of ecosystems. The cultivation of rooftop gardens, seed banks, and rituals reflect a collective effort to rebuild. Recovery is neither swift nor total—it is ecological, slow, and communal (Atwood, 374).

The Eco-Gothic Aesthetic in Morrison and Atwood

Both Toni Morrison and Margaret Atwood use eco-gothic themes to reveal how the environment and human psychology are deeply intertwined, especially when it comes to fear and trauma. In Morrison's *Beloved*, the house at 124 Bluestone Road isn't just a setting—it feels alive, weighed down by grief, memories, and the presence of restless spirits (Morrison 4). The house decays, whispers, and remembers, embodying all the anguish its inhabitants have suffered. Even the surrounding nature isn't

clearly good or bad; it can be comforting but also holds secrets and pain. Ghosts, overgrown trees, and isolation combine to turn the landscape into a witness—sometimes even a participant—in the racial trauma the characters endure. Nature in *Beloved* doesn't let past horrors fade; instead, it keeps memories present, mysterious, and powerful (Morrison 35).

In contrast, Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* thrusts us into a world where the collapse of civilization has let both nature and technology run wild. The result is unsettling: strange genetic hybrids and monstrous creations haunt broken cities, making the world feel unfamiliar and eerie. Nature, once twisted for profit and control, now turns against its makers—becoming less a passive backdrop and more an active force, both bearing witness to human mistakes and sometimes seeking revenge (Atwood 212).

In both novels, the eco-gothic is not just about creepy settings or scary monsters. It's about people: their fears, their hopes, and their struggles. Morrison and Atwood use haunted houses, ghosts, and ruined worlds to show us how trauma can be carried by places and landscapes, not just by individuals. Their characters live with these terrors every day, trying to survive, find connection, and sometimes even beauty amid the ruins and the memories. The terror their worlds evoke isn't just atmospheric—it's deeply personal, shaped by history and experience, and always tied back to the humanity of those who endure it (Morrison, *Beloved*; Atwood, *The Year of the Flood* 374).

Intergenerational Trauma and Environmental Inheritance

Morrison and Atwood show that environmental trauma is not just experienced by one generation but can be passed down—shaping the very land, homes, and even bodies of those who come next. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pecola's world is stunted and depleted: the neglected soil around her echoes the emotional wounds that linger in her family's history. The infertility of the earth becomes a symbol for pain that keeps cycling through generations, not easily healed. In *Beloved*, the aftermath of slavery isn't just Sethe's burden; it seeps into her daughter Denver and haunts the house itself, blurring the line between personal memory and the physical environment.

In *The Year of the Flood*, Atwood gives an environmental degradation world, which appears to have a long-term effect impacting the prospect of the generations. Such characters as Ren and Toby inherit not only environmental destruction of their forebears but also spiritual and moral ambiguities of existing. They have material and moral inheritance of nature.

Rites, Religion, and the Growth Next to Nature

Spirituality is much more influential in character regarding the way they interact with the surroundings. In the Atwood speculative fiction, Gods Gardeners create a religio-green-fusion. They keep Sabbaths set on extinct animals, eat only on sustainable sources and believe in nature as a god. Such rituals represent the opposition to the corporate dominance as well as environmental ethics. Morrison also brings up the theme of spirituality in terms of land and healing. In *Beloved*, Baby Suggs is sacred because she preaches self-love and community healing in the forest making it a sacred place. These ritualized performances of communion with the environment reignite a connection between the human and the ecological and as such is based on ancestral memory, a cultural survival.

Atwood and Climate Change in Fiction

In her dystopias, Margaret Atwood frequently focuses on the problem of climate crisis that comes because of human carelessness and corporate greed. In *The Year of the Flood* and *Oryx and Crake*, the planet is redesigned through ecological disaster, sea level change and genetic engineering. These texts represent speculative futures that echo present environmental anxieties. Atwood warns that current disregard for ecological balance could lead to irreversible damage—not only to the planet but to human morality and agency.

God's Gardeners serve as the novel's eco-ethical core, offering sustainable living practices and reverence for the biosphere in the face of collapse. Their "Saint Days" commemorate real-world environmental activists such as Rachel Carson, reinforcing the novel's grounding in contemporary environmental consciousness, as mentioned by Atwood in *The Year of the Flood* (234).

Environmental Racism and Urban Ecology in *The Bluest Eye*

Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* provides one of the earliest literary depictions of environmental racism in an urban African American community. The Breedloves live in a structurally unsound, rat-infested building, surrounded by dying flora and polluted streets. Morrison juxtaposes this with white neighborhoods, which are clean and green. This segregation of ecological care reflects structural racial inequalities.

As scholar Kimberly N. Ruffin argues, Morrison's depiction of decaying urban ecosystems aligns with real-world racialized environmental neglect, where African American communities suffer disproportionately from pollution, lack of green space, and unsafe housing (Ruffin 78).

The Role of Food, Agriculture, and Eco-Sustenance

Both Morrison and Atwood use food and agricultural imagery to explore eco-sustenance and deprivation. In *Beloved*, food symbolizes both abundance and denial. Characters often recall starvation during slavery, while Baby Suggs' feasts represent temporary wholeness and communion with the earth.

Atwood's *The Year of the Flood* explores a futuristic model of sustainable living through rooftop gardens, vegan diets, and seed preservation. The Gardeners' food rituals oppose genetically modified and industrial food systems. Scholar Stacy Alaimo notes that "bodily ingestion connects us materially to a vast web of ecological relations" (26).

Final Reflection: Toward an Intersectional Ecojustice Framework

In synthesizing these themes, the works of Morrison and Atwood suggest that any ecological critique must be intersectional—attentive to race, gender, class, and spirituality. The authors resist simplified depictions of "nature" and instead show it as a dynamic participant in both oppression and healing. Their fiction expands ecocritical discourse by foregrounding environmental justice as both personal and political.

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