

【연구논문】

Naturalized Women: Ecofeminism in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy**

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I. Introduction

Earning Pulitzer Prize in 1987 and Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993, Toni Morrison has been an important and representative figure of African American literature. As an African American female writer, she has written about America, particularly on racism, ongoing effects of slavery, the exclusion of the black community and its internal dispute, and black women's experiences, from her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), through her most renowned novel, *Beloved* (1987), and to her last novel *God Help the Child* (2015). As John Updike puts it, from her first novel, she emphasizes that "the past is not past, in a historical vein." According to Updike, *The Bluest Eye* takes place in 1940–1941, and includes an impressionistic map of

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black flight from the South during the Depression; *Sula* (1974) describes “a black neighborhood called the Bottom” from 1919 to 1965; *Song of Solomon* (1977) “begins four years after Lindbergh’s transatlantic flight, in 1927”; and *Beloved* “takes place a few years after the Civil War.” Her 2008 novel *A Mercy* “takes us deeper into the bygone than any of Morrison’s previous novels.” It depicts Virginia Jacob Vaark’s house in the 1680s, when America was not yet founded as a nation.

Jacob, a poor orphan born in England, comes to America as an agent of the Dutch West India Company, and runs a farm after inheriting land in New England from an unknown uncle. He later invests in the rum trade and makes a fortune. His third house, a luxurious and grand mansion built after he has torn down his first and second shabby houses, represents his financial progress and success. In this sense, Jacob represents one of the early settlers who built the new nation of America, and his third house symbolizes his achievement of the American Dream. However, the novel reveals that this dream is achieved through pre-established exploitive colonialism and slavery. Jacob’s journey to America as an agent of the Dutch West India company—which fiercely expanded their trading empire in the Americas—already implies that his seemingly personal journey is implicated in colonialism. Although he criticizes the slave trade, he makes a fortune by investing his money in a sugar cane plantation in Barbados and in the rum trade. The destruction of the wilderness implies that Jacob internalizes “the colonial ideology” (Kwon 9), which justifies European settlers’ destruction and usurpation of the land previously inhabited by the Native Americans under the name of

development. This reveals that the foundation of America results from exploiting the racial Other and destroying and transforming the land and home of Native Americans into plantations.

Four female characters in Jacob's house—a white English woman, Rebekka, and three non-white women, Florens, Sorrow, and Lina—reveal what underlies his success: colonialism, slavery, and exclusion and exploitation of the Other. Rebekka is Jacob's "mail-order bride" (Wardi 23), sent to America by her father to save living costs. Florens was the slave of a Portuguese slave owner, Senhor D'Ortega, who offered her to Jacob to pay off his master's debt. After losing her family in a shipwreck, being raped, and experiencing a miscarriage, Sorrow is sold to Jacob's house. Lina is a native American. After most people in her tribe, including her family, die of smallpox, she is adopted and abused by a European Presbyterian family and now works as a servant at Jacob's house.

By focusing on the female characters and their relationship with Jacob, critics, like Anissa Wardi, have examined how Morrison "links nations' buildings—creation and inhabitation of the country—to the forced labor of Africans, the declamation of Native American nations, and the transmutation of earth into farms" (23). Meanwhile, Mar Gallego-Duran similarly examines how "the devastating and maligning effects of patriarchal supremacy on the lives of the female characters" symbolizes colonial violence on the racial Other and nature (103-04). Critics have also analyzed the similar but distinctive experience of each woman character. For instance, Kwon Hyuck Mi reads Rebekka as a victim who "surrendered to the [coercive] patriarchal code" (12) through contractual marriage. Focusing on

Florens, Jami Carlacio examines how the black woman's search for love, a black freeman, ends up with "[placing] herself as the subordinate in this unequal relationship" (139) under patriarchy. Meanwhile, examining Lina and her forced conversion to Christianity, Susan Neal Mayberry reveals how Lina becomes "domesticated by new white men" and becomes a "financial, religious, and/or sexual commodity" (175). Concerning Sorrow, Wardi analyzes how she "embodies the Middle Passage and marks 'sorrow' of the Africans' displacement and forced habitation of the slave ships" (27). However, examining the female characters, current readings have overlooked important aspects of Morrison's representation: she represents her female characters and their experiences through natural objects and nature.

In *A Mercy*, when Rebekka crosses the Atlantic from England (where her father lives) to America (where her husband lives), she describes herself as "the cod between the decks" (*M* 85).¹⁾ Florens is accused by her lover, Blacksmith, of neglecting his adopted son, and she is called "wilderness" (166). Lina is treated like "a dog" (123) by the European Christians who adopt her. Sorrow believes that her first dead child lives in the sea and goes to a riverbank alone when she gives birth to her second child. By applying Ecofeminism, I examine how and why Morrison connects women's experiences with nature and natural objects. Focusing on Jacob's house, I also reveal how the four female characters—Rebekka, Florens, Sorrow, and Lina—represent colonial violence and exploitation and how they resist these forces.

1) The italicized *M* refers to *A Mercy*.

II. Naturalized Women, Feminized Nature.

Coining the term “ecofeminism” in her 1974 book *Feminism or Death*, Françoise d'Eaubonne address the oppression and devaluation of women and the earth by men. Many, like Karen J. Warren, have elaborated on the similarities and “connections between the oppression of women and the oppression of nature” (4) by examining how women are naturalized and nature is feminized under patriarchy:

Women are often described in animal terms (e.g. as lays, fucks, screws, cunts) and plaything terms (e.g. as babes, dolls, girls, pets)—terms which contribute to viewing women as inferior, not fully rational, and child-like. Just as women are naturalized in the dominant discourse, so, too, is nature feminized. “Mother Nature” is raped, mastered, conquered, mined; her secrets are “penetrated” and her “womb” is to be put into service of the “man of science.” Virgin timber is felled, cut down; fertile soil is tilled and land that lies fallow is “barren,” useless. Language fuses women’s and animal’s or nature’s inferior status in a patriarchal culture. We exploit nature and animals by associating them with women’s lesser status, and, conversely, dominate women by associating women with nature’s and animals’ interior status. (*Feminism and Ecology* 190)

Analyzing how patriarchy gives men the right to control nature, animals, and women, Warren emphasizes the need to include an ecocritical perspective in feminist theory and practice in order to adequately understand the oppression of women.

Critics have further added the issue of race to the discussion of ecocriticism and examined how the oppression of women and nature underlines colonialism and development led by the West. For

instance, Maria Mies argues that Western civilization has developed by violently colonizing and exploiting “women, nature, and foreign peoples and countries” (43). She criticizes the conceptualization of women, nature, and the colonies as primitive, backward, and uncivilized, as European male-centered patriarchy justifies and veils violence and exploitation as progress. Similarly, Vandana Shiva argues that development, civilization, and globalization led by Western men have come about through “destruction for women, nature, and subjugated culture” of the Other inside and outside the nation (2). According to Shiva, by denying and rejecting women and native people’s knowledge of nature, Western and male-centered knowledge serves to conceptualize women, nature, and indigenous peoples as underdeveloped, primitive, or barren/virgin, and reduce them to passive objects that can be justifiably used and dominated by Western men. Western knowledge also serves to naturalize the Other and make this exploitation and destruction unrecognizable and invisible. Shiva thus argues that the Other, “women, peasants, and tribes in the third world,” must resist the development led by the West and white men, and “must fight for liberation from development” (192). She emphasizes the importance of restoring the counter-knowledge of nature. Describing Jacob’s house, Morrison’s *A Mercy* reveals the under-recognized exploitation and colonialism of women, nature, and indigenous people.

Jacob develops barren and empty land into a farm and builds a systematically designed mansion. Building and possessing a great house is not his personal dream, but he is influenced by other European men. Jacob is obsessed with building a third house after

visiting D'Ortega's estate. D'Ortega accumulates enormous wealth by participating in the trans-Atlantic slave trade to transport slaves from Angola to Brazil. He is also a slave owner who runs tobacco plantations. This suggests that the money to build and sustain his great plantation estate comes from colonizing the non-white Other. The sexual violence he exerts on Floren's mother—"a minha mãe" who came from Angola to America through the Middle Passage—symbolizes the brutal violence that is also exerted on nature. His house—which is more magnificent and colorful than any other rich person's house—is built by exploiting natural resources, such as "soft southern wood" and "creamy stone" (*M* 15), and transforming the land and wilderness into a Western-made system, a plantation. Jacob criticizes the slave trade, but he wants to build a house just like D'Ortega's, which implies that Jacob, like his predecessor, is deeply involved in colonialism and its exploitation of nature, non-white people, and women.

The changes in Jacob's houses imply that his exploitation of the Other and nature increases. He builds his first house with a "dirt floor" and the second house with "wooden floors" (*M* 43). Inspired by D'Ortega's plantation estate, he wants to build a great house. He invests his money in the West Indian plantations and rum trade, which represents the triangular trade between Africa (where slaves are sent to the West Indies through the Middle Passage), the West Indies (where the slaves from Africa work at plantations to produce raw materials), and New England (manufactured rum and exported it to Africa).² As Wardi puts it, Jacob's income from the Barbadian sugar trade and his "construction of his palatial estate—financed through the

slave trade—as well as his acceptance of Florens, a young Angolan girl” as a means of reimbursement of D’Ortega’s debt reveal the exploitative colonialism of nature and non-white people underlying his success and development.

Jacob’s encounter with the Native American highlights his exploitative relationship with nature. The scene in which he is riding a horse, Regina, and passing the Lenape trail to go to Virginia exemplifies how violently Jacob treats animals. While Jacob “feel[s] free and [rode] carefree” (*M* 10) on Regina’s back, she is physically struggling and sweating, because he makes her run for a long time without stopping until she is “drenched and snorting” (11). Although Jacob does not realize it, his comfort is the result of the animal’s labor and hard work and the violence to capture and tame the wild animal for human use and need. The scene is set on the Lenape trail, which is named after the Lenape Indian tribe. Lenape Indians, also called Delaware Indians, “did not conceptualize ownership” (Peterson 13) of the land and any natural objects, but their lands were taken by the white settlers and they were displaced. The military violence to usurp the lands and kill the natives, however, is overridden and naturalized as a contract. According to *Colonial Records of Pennsylvania*, the Kings, Chiefs, and ancestors of the Lenape Indians “had granted” their lands to William Penn through contracts, “with which they were satisfied and content” (Hazard 467). This suggests the untold history and violence of Jacob’s inherited farm and land from an unknown uncle.

2) See Herbert C. Bell for more on how lumber, and especially rum, molasses, and sugar became the prominent and profitable trade items in New England.

Built on the land that was once the home of Native Americans, the third house epitomizes the ecological cost resulting from the exploitation. As mentioned earlier, Jacob's source of money—the West Indian plantation and rum trade—suggests his involvement in colonialism and his exploitation of the non-white Other. It also causes the extinction of native plants, destructive changes in the natural environment under plantations, and increased exploitation of human hands and animal power to develop the soil and grow and harvest its products. The novel reveals violence through the construction of Jacob's third house, which requires “the death of fifty trees” (*M* 43), horses to pull “men, barrows, a blacksmith, lumber, twine, pots of pitch, hammers” (89), and the labor of slaves and underprivileged white servants. Natural objects, such as flowers, are also displaced and used to decorate the house. The flower was rooted out from its natural habitat and relocated to an artificially created place. The separated flower suggests that Jacob's house is built by destroying and appropriating nature. The four women in his house, Rebekka, Florens, Sorrow, and Lina, highlight the exploitation and violence embedded in his transforming the land and the nature.

Jacob crosses the Atlantic for success in the New World; America serves as a land of opportunity and the American Dream for this European man. Rebekka is traded and exchanged between men and crosses the same sea to play the different roles of a dutiful daughter to her father in England and a good wife and mother at Jacob's house in America. She realizes this status. On a ship departing from England to America, she describes herself as “packed like a cod between decks” (*M* 73): she and her life are confined and oppressed

under patriarchy between men and between England and America. Her words, “the world beneath you is both graveyard and heaven” (73), imply that she will die under the sea, but it is also how and where she is freed. Looking at the sea, Rebekka also says, “the smell of you [the sea] is like fresh monthly blood” (73). The feminized sea with the smell of blood serves to ominously foretell her future: she loses her three children and cannot enjoy motherhood, and she participates in colonialism and the exploitation of non-white people and nature by becoming a slave owner’s wife.

The violence of colonialism and European patriarchy is more brutally acted upon non-white women. The trans-Atlantic slave trade makes “a minha mãe” property to be legally sold, bought, traded, and circulated in the labor market and makes her body a site of sexual violence. She begs Jacob to take Florens to his house in order to prevent D’Ortega from raping her daughter, but Florens misunderstands this and thinks she has been abandoned by her mother. As Wardi puts it, “Florens is a symbol of the African Diaspora insofar as her painful status as orphan mirrors the conditions of [African Americans’] displacement” (24). Like her mother, Florens is traded and sold by European slave owners. At Jacob’s house, Florens’s status as a black female slave is different from that of Rebekka, who is a woman but is Florens’s white master. Florens’s encounter with Widow Ealing, an old white woman outside Jacob’s house, highlights the pre-established racial hierarchy between the non-white woman and the white woman. When Rebekka is stricken with smallpox, she forces Florens to go to Blacksmith’s house to get medicine. On the way to Blacksmith’s house, Florens

visits Widow Ealing's house and is asked to present her slave contract letter. Widow Ealing orders Florens to take off her clothes and examines every part of her body, and at that moment, Florens realizes her vulnerability by comparing herself to "the animal-like Other" (Carlacio 141): "Without [the letter] I am a weak calf abandoned by the herd, a turtle without shell" (*M* 115). This suggests that women and nature are equally conceptualized and treated as weak and vulnerable, and Florens is aware of it.

In addition, the novel reveals the division of a black woman and a black man through Florens and her relationship with Blacksmith, a black freed man. Blacksmith works to build Jacob's third house and participates in exploiting natural resources by destroying forests and cutting trees. After learning of Florens's love for Blacksmith, Lina warns her, "You are one leaf on his tree" (61). This implies the unequal power dynamics between the two by replicating the relationship between Jacob and Rebekka, who are both racially white but divided by gender. Although Florens denies her subordinate status by saying "No. I am his tree" (61), this claim is soon debunked. When Blacksmith leaves Jacob's house to take care of Rebekka, he asks Florens to take care of his adopted young son, Malaik, but she accidentally breaks his arm while trying to stop his crying. Blacksmith criticizes her by saying "You [Florens] are nothing but wilderness" (141). He identifies her—who fails to adequately fulfill an expected woman's role as a mother—with wilderness that is degraded for being uncultivated, useless, barren, and uninhabited.

However, the novel does not simply depict naturalized women as oppressed and passive groups. Instead, they are recovered and

represent their counter-knowledge of nature through which they criticize and resist the exploitative system. Responding to Blacksmith's criticism, Florens attacks him like a wild animal: "I bare my teeth to bite you, to tear you open" (*M* 157). As Paola Nardi points out, returning to Jacob's house, Florens is "marching down the road 'barefoot, bloody but proud' (*M* 141) while she is going back to the plantation after her journey through the forest" (130). Arriving at Jacob's house, Florens speaks to her mother in her mind: "I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. . . . Hear me? Slave. Free. I last" (*M* 161). Nardi argues that Florens "proudly" accepts "her new status: she has developed into a full-grown, independent, self-reliant woman" (130). However, this reading overlooks Florens' social and historical conditions: she is a slave. In this sense, her statement shows her realization of her oppressed status as wilderness, unforgiven, and slave and her willingness to survive and live, unforgiving the systems that imposes her oppressed status. Her life as a slave makes the "soles of [her] feet hard as cypress" (161), but she will live and last as Florens as a tree, not a leaf.

Sorrow's oppressed status and resistance are also represented by nature. The sea is the place where Sorrow, the daughter of a captain of a ship, lived, and lost her family. After a shipwreck, she starts to see imaginary twins, lives with the white sawyer who cuts the tress and causes their deaths, and is raped by his sons. Unlike Jacob and Rebekka's journey to America, Sorrow is "symbolic of the trans-Atlantic journey" (Wardi 23) of slaves and represents the Africans' displacement and homeless status in America. The rape Sorrow experiences and her

subsequent pregnancy and miscarriage suggest the brutal violence that slaves experience during the Middle Passage. It also reveals what Warren argues: “Just as women are naturalized in the dominant discourse, so, too, is nature feminized. ‘Mother Nature’ is raped, mastered, [and] conquered” (*Feminism and Ecology* 190).

Nature, however, also provides an imaginary sanctuary for Sorrow. She steadily thinks of “her [dead] baby breathing water” (*M* 123) under the sea and “down all the streams of the world” (124). Sorrow can imagine “under the sea” as a place outside white male dominance and slavery. Thus, it seems logical that Sorrow runs to water, to a riverbank, alone when she gives birth to her second child. After childbirth, Sorrow thinks that “she had done something, something important, by herself” (133) and the imaginary Twins disappear. Sorrow speaks to her baby, “I am your mother, My name is Complete” (134). By analyzing the meaning of her changing name, Susmita Roye argues that Sorrow “exercises her own agency and exerts her will to counteract the shortcomings of an interrupted girlhood and emerge into complete womanhood and motherhood” (223). However, the fact that Sorrow becomes pregnant by sexual violence challenges this positive reading. Moreover, the novel’s depiction of a mother (a minha mãe) and a child (Florens) suggests that Complete and her newborn baby cannot be free from the exploitative and violent colonial systems as slaves.³⁾ In fact, although Sorrow feels comfortable near water and imagines under the sea as an alternative place, as Rebekka mentions, it

3) Counterpointing Roye’s reading, Darby Witek also argues that “Sorrow’s emotional attachment to her child will allow her to become enslaved to whomever can economically provide for her child” (58).

is “both graveyard and heaven” (*M* 73): it is also death. As Wardi points out, “[d]isplaced, [Sorrow] nevertheless becomes at home with herself. Her children, metaphorically connected to water, indicate that Sorrow has not achieved citizenship in place, but is reintegrated into water: a non-place, an extra-social nowhere that lies eternally outside—or on the margins” (30).

Morrison largely deals with African American issues, and black women’s experiences in particular, but in *A Mercy*, she also focuses on the exclusion of the Native American through Lina and reveals that when European settlers built homes in the New World, they usurped the homes of the original inhabitants and destroyed the land and the environment. Lina symbolizes violence. The European settlers kill her tribe by spreading the plague and invading the villages and lands in which indigenous people lived. They also reject the native culture: “bathing naked in the river [becomes] a sin; that plucking cherries from a tree burdened with them [becomes] theft” (48). By degrading the land and the native culture as barren wilderness, primitive, uncivilized, and undeveloped, Presbyterians changed the landscape and forced the indigenous people, including Lina, to convert to Christianity. In this process, Lina is treated like a dog: they give her food by placing a plate of meal at the front door. The violence they exert on Lina in order to domesticate and tame her reflects the violence exerted on nature and animals to change it to meet their needs. The name “Lina,” a Presbyterian name after Messalina—the third wife of the Roman emperor Claudius who is characterized as promiscuous and sexually voracious—also suggests violence and how they justify it: the Europeans sexually abuse her

and justify their violence and exploitation by attributing promiscuity and savagery to her.

Lina, however, neither accepts Western knowledge of nature nor converts herself to Christianity. She instead provides a counter-knowledge of nature, which differs from exploitative and destructive Western knowledge. She believes that plants have lives and that nature has an equal status with people. She is skeptical about Jacob, who tries to develop his houses by destroying the natural environment and criticizes the “mal-fortune” he earns by “killing tress in that number, without asking their permission” (*M* 44). Lina “cawed with birds, chatted with plants, spoke to squirrels, sang to the cow and opened her mouth to rain” (48–49). She communicates with animals to overcome the painful memories and loneliness of when her family who lived with her died and the village was burned down. By communicating with nature, she tries to restore her relationship with nature, which is her resistance to keeping her custom of African America. Her relationship with nature enables us to see, criticize, and resist colonial discourse and its destructive force.

III. Conclusion

In an interview on *A Mercy* in 2008, Morrison stated that although America seemed beautiful on the surface, various conflicts abounded. Likewise, Jacob’s beautiful and fancy house in the novel—which seems to symbolize development, success, and the achievement of the American Dream—has conflicting realities: it is financed through the

slave trade and built by usurping the homes of Native Americans, destroying the natural environment, and exploiting the labor of humans and animals. Reading *A Mercy* through ecofeminism can reveal the female characters and their relationship with nature. Critics have overlooked it, but it can highlight the under-recognized exploitation and violence embedded in development. Moreover, in Jacob's house, slaves, Native Americans, as well as the poor underclass white men Willard Bond and Scully—who want to escape the house but are forced to stay due to their increasing debts despite their labor as servants—suffer from slavery, European patriarchy, and hierarchical social structures of race, gender, and class. Morrison warns that it is not a successful and ideal place for white people either. Jacob dies before moving into his newly built dream house, and Rebekka constantly loses her children. None of those who live or stay at Jacob's great mansion feel that they have a real home. The past is not past. In the interview about her novel, Morrison emphasized that she wanted to challenge the notion that “owning the labor of people is constant in the world” (Neary). This suggests hierarchal social and economic structures that exploit women, the non-white, the underclass, animals, and nature. It also justifies the exploitation in the name of development persisting in the present. By depicting the 1680s, the period of nation-building, Morrison reveals and asks readers to see the violence, exploitation, and division of the excluded and nature through Jacob's house, which has perpetuated within a prosperous, highly developed America and urges them to create an alternative way to relate nature and the excluded Other to make America a home.

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Abstract

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Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008) describes Jacob Vaark, an early settler from England, and his grand house that symbolizes the American Dream in the 1680s. The source of his success is colonialism and slavery, as revealed by four female characters—a white Englishwoman Rebekka and three non-white women Florens, Sorrow, and Lina. Analyzing how the novel compares the women's experiences with nature and natural objects, this paper draws on ecofeminism as a theoretical frame of analysis to examine the novel's hitherto overlooked representations of *naturalized women and feminized nature*. The paper analyzes how the novel represents oppressions and exploitations of the four women in relation to nature that is similarly appropriated and *developed* by European men. The paper maintains that the novel does not represent these “naturalized” women as powerless and passive but portrays them as growing characters who resist patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism.

Key Words

ecofeminism, slavery, women, nature, Morrison

