

## Research Article

## “They could defecate over a whole people [...] and defecate some more by tearing up the land”: Ecological (Un) consciousness and Resistance in Toni Morrison’s Selected Novels

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to deconstruct Toni Morrison’s selected novels through the lenses of ecocriticism. It looks at her work from an ecocritical angle. *Sula* has traditionally been read as a story about female friendship ; *Song of Solomon* has been critically acclaimed for its vivid capture of African American cultural heritage ; *Tar Baby* is regarded as a masterpiece because of its high folkloric resonance ; *Beloved* is perceived as a survey of the horrors of slavery ; *Paradise* is regarded as the narrative of contemporary communities confronted with great social changes, while *A Mercy* is considered to be a story of black women slaves’ struggles to gain freedom in America in the 1600s. Historically, critics have attempted to perceive Morrison’s fiction from the socio-historical lens that has little to do with Nature. However, Nature serves as a background to Morrison’s work. It not only serves as imagery but more of a living being that reacts to human exploitation. Morrison’s selected novels highlight diverse aspects of this human versus nature relationship that deserves an in-depth analysis. In fact, these novels provide ample evidence that the author sees ecosensitivity and ecological consciousness as possible ways to curb environmental degradation. This paper posits the nonhuman world encoded in Morrison’s novels. It maintains that Morrison’s fiction could raise awareness about ecological wisdom which is key to understanding and solving the current environmental challenges.

**Keywords:** Ecocriticism, Ecology, Eco-consciousness, Eco-theology, Capitalism, Nature, Oppression, Resistance

### Introduction

Ecology is one of the most discussed issues today. It is generally agreed that we are facing a global ecological crisis, as evidenced by the increase in pollution, climate change and scarcity of natural resources.

The threat continuous deterioration of the environment poses on humanity has caught the attention of a bunch of writers who are using their craft to create works that attempt to explore, or at best, resolve the dichotomy between nature and human being. Toni Morrison<sup>1</sup> is part of them. The power of Nature, its beauty, its decay and agony resonate throughout Morrison’s selected novels, providing thus the appropriateness of applying ecocriticism<sup>2</sup>.

Toni Morrison refuses being labelled. She rejects any –ism, feeling that it diminishes her work or even dismisses it. She always objected to such “positions that are closed” and admits that she has given “equitable access and opening doors

to all sorts of things”<sup>3</sup>. As such, her ecocritical work cannot be labeled exclusively as ‘eco-feminist’ work and restricted to ecofeminism’s traditional conceptual binary opposition: man/culture versus women/nature.

Following this hypothesis, reading Morrison ecocritically implies that we adopt points of view that extend beyond gender and include aspects such as –but not limited to– history and religion.

This study starts with a conceptual clarification so as to properly define the focus and state the purpose of this research which is to read Morrison’s selected novels, in the light of ecocriticism. Secondly, it deals with Morrison’s characters’ troubled relationship with Nature with a particular focus on ecological unconsciousness and its impact on the life of the communities. Thirdly, it discusses both non-human and human resistance to the rapid destruction of Nature.

### I. Theoretical and Conceptual Considerations

A theoretical and conceptual framework will certainly help form a common ground with readers who may not be familiar with the terminology we will be using in the framework of the present study.

Exploring Morrison’s selected novels from an ecocritical perspective requires that we first clarify some concepts and theories that are basic to this issue. Especially important for the present study are the theory of ecocriticism and the

<sup>1</sup> Toni Morrison is an American writer, editor and professor. She was born Chloe Anthony Wofford in Lorain, Ohio, in 1931. Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993.

<sup>2</sup> The term is believed to have been coined by William Rueckert in 1978. But a few works, including *The Country and the City*, written by Raymond Williams (published in 1973) and Annette Kolodny’s *The Lay of the Land* (published in 1975) may be said to have been ecocriticism before the term ‘Ecocriticism’ was coined.

<sup>3</sup> Carolyn C. Denard (Ed.) (2008) *Toni Morrison: Conversations*. University Press of Mississippi. P.140.

concept of eco-consciousness.

### I.1. Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism, also known as ecological literary criticism, is a branch of criticism which seeks to analyse the relationship between human beings and their physical environment and the way it is reflected in literature. Ecocriticism explores the way contemporary environmental issues could be addressed and improved. It is inherently interdisciplinary; it brings together social sciences and humanities in its approach to the study of literature.

An ecocritical reading of a given text comes with a host of interesting questions that offers important understandings of environmental relationships and reflects the state of health of the environment. It urges researchers to analyse how the elements of the natural world are depicted in the world of the text, by the author.

The enterprise of ecocritical reading of literary texts has long been influenced by the scientific, the gender and the socio-historical approaches, neglecting, in so doing, the religious and psychological aspects. Toni Morrison’s ecocritical perspective is not restricted to a gender<sup>4</sup>, a socio-historical and a scientific envisaging of the environment but also includes both the psychological and religious<sup>5</sup> aspects, as evidenced by her personification and deification of Nature.

### I.2. Eco-consciousness

As ecological (un)consciousness and resistance are concerned in this study, we will also refer to Theodore Roszak’s concepts of ecological ego<sup>6</sup>, ecological unconscious and ecological unconsciousness.

Simply put, Roszak argues that there is a connection between the inner being and the celestial intelligence, and it is that connection that guarantees ecosensitivity. So, when these two entities are disconnected, the subject shows some signs of greed. S/he sees Nature as an inert body to be exploited and is motivated by a will to bring Nature under control.

Such concepts allow us to see in the text if a harmonious and balanced eco-human relationship has been maintained and how far has human interest been given preference, and that whether human beings are accountable for both their positive and negative actions towards Nature. It also allow us to find in the text whether there are some voices which alert the reader about environmental deterioration and if there has been a suggestion of possible ways to preserve the natural world from

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Morrison views Nature neither as a mechanical object which is subject to manipulation and control, nor as a mere feminised exploitable resource. Without denying the interconnectedness between the exploitation of Nature and the subjugation of women, she holds the view that Nature should be dealt with as a spiritual entity.

<sup>6</sup> This concept which is based on the principle of the need for a continuum and communion of humankind and nature has been largely discussed in Theodore Roszak’s book *The Voice of the Earth: an Exploration of Ecopsychology*, published in 1992.

agony.

### II. Ecological Unconsciousness: Nature Destruction beyond needs

Throughout the selected novels of Morrison, ecological unconsciousness is mainly exemplified by frenzied and uncontrolled production supported by unbridled capitalism and greed which lead to ecology tragedies that eventually perturbs social equilibrium.

The opening lines of *Sula*<sup>7</sup> are nothing more than a chronicle of the destruction of biodiversity for the erection of a leisure resort reserved for super-rich in the fictional Medallion/Bottom neighborhood:

In that Place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighborhood. It stood in the hills above the valley town of Medallion and spread all the way to the river. It is called the suburbs now, but when black people lived there it was called Bottom. One road, shaded by beeches, oaks, maples and chestnuts, connected it to the valley. The beeches are gone now, and so are the pears where children sat and yelled down through the blossoms to passerby. Generous funds have been allotted to level the stripped and faded buildings that clutter the road from Medallion up to the golf course. (*Sula*, 3)

The narrator tells how fast was the transformation: “[...] it was lovely up in the Bottom. After the town grew and farm land turned into a village and the village into a town and the streets of Medallion were hot and dusty with progress [...]” (5-6).

The neighbourhood in *Sula* was turned into a mere touristic spot, with a golf course surrounded with bungalows and a tunnel to link the hills of the valley. In short, the place has become a luxury resort where the wealthy relax during holidays and weekends.

As Anthony Cohen notices, this capitalistic invasion brought some changes which not only accounted for an irrevocable alteration and loss of the habitats of Bottom community members, but also resulted in the removal of a large patrimony of social traditions their identity is based upon<sup>8</sup>. All this contributed to the fragmentation of the whole community.

The environmental impact of the pre-industrial Bottom life was minimal since its inhabitants conducted a subsistence

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<sup>7</sup> Morrison, Toni. *Sula*. New York: Knopf, 1973.

<sup>8</sup> The way small groups and small ethnic communities, like the fictional Bottom in *Sula*, are facing tremendous pressures due to rapid industrialization and economic development, and are uprooted and dislocated from their environment and forced to acquire other ways of life, has been carefully analysed by the anthropologist Anthony P. Cohen in his book *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, published in 1985.

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economy based on agrarian activities and did not grab more than they need for survival. They used to consider land rather as a generous mother than a source of profit. They did not attach importance to prosperity, nor did they base their hierarchy on material possessions.

But the destruction of Nature and the fast urbanization with subsequent changes began to perturb the balance of the community whose members became more infested with the desire for profit; highly-paid jobs and posts, and who assimilated wealth and economic progress as new status symbols.

As the narrator states: “the black people [...] abandon the hills to whoever was interested. It was sad, because the Bottom had been a real place. These young ones kept talking about the community, but they left the hills to the poor, the old.” (166)

The plight of the fictional Bottom community in Ohio reflects an historical fact that occurred in the State of Ohio. It can never be said often enough that history undergirds Morrison's fiction: it is both a source of creative and philosophic insight. It is, in some ways, a justification for her act of writing. As the writer acknowledges herself, to write *Sula*, she resorted to an anecdote her mother had told her:

When [my mother] first got married, she and my father went to live in Pittsburgh. And I remember her telling me that in those days all the people lived in the hills of Pittsburgh, but now they live amid the smoke and dirt in the heart of that city. It's clear up in those hills, and so I used that idea, but in a small river town in Ohio<sup>9</sup>.

Like the fictional Bottom community, more and more small ethnic communities are becoming subject to the pressures of fast industrialisation, rapid urbanisation, and sometimes forced displacement, that cares very little about the impact of the destruction of biodiversity on the growth of these communities.

Throughout her fiction, Morrison laments this shift in values and implicitly denounces the waste of capitalism and subsequent over-exploitation of natural resources and its negative impact on both the environment and the homogeneity of Bottom community.

It is “the tunnel”, a symbol of the rise of consumerism and capitalist exploitation which swallowed up acres of land that provoked the sudden and massive loss of life ever recorded throughout the history of the community. Many Bottom community members tragically lost their lives as they tried to

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<sup>9</sup>Robert, Stepto. “Intimate Things in Place: A Conversation with Toni Morrison,” in: *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, ed. Danille Taylor Guthrie. Mississippi: Univ. Press of Mississippi. 1994. P.12.

destroy “the tunnel”, which was responsible for the predicament in which the whole community was mired. (*Sula*, 161)

Examples of ecology tragedies also abound in the pages of Morrison's *Tar Baby*<sup>10</sup>: Valerian Street, a 75-year old retired candy manufacturer from Philadelphia, invaded the fictionalized Caribbean islands of Dominique and Isle des Chevaliers, “killing off rats, snakes and other destructive animal life, [and otherwise] adjusting the terrain for comfortable living” (*Tar Baby*, 54), after which, he built a summer residence “L'Arbre de la Croix”, and transformed it into a definitive home.

Valerian emblemizes the destruction and overexploitation of natural resources from rainforest; an ecocide that serves his own self-interest, at the expense of the community he lives in. As the reader learns early on, he contracted a Mexican architect and brought in migrants workers from Haiti to build an impressive vacation home on Isle des Chevaliers, a Caribbean island he bought from the profit he made from ‘Street Brothers Candy Company’; his US-based candy company.

In this account of the island's recent transformation, the narrator describes how Valerian's project of vacation estates destroyed natural flora and fauna and produced at the same time a kind of ecological entropy as the river stagnated and was no longer able to reach the sea :

The end of the world, as it turned out, was nothing more than a collection of magnificent winter houses on Isle des Chevaliers. When laborers imported from Haiti came to clear the land, clouds and fish were convinced that the world was over, that the sea-green green of the sea and the sky-blue blue of the sky were no longer permanent. Only the champion daisy trees were serene. After all, they were part of a rain forest already two thousand years old and scheduled for eternity, so they ignored the men and continued to rock the diamondbacks that slept in their arms. It took the river to persuade them that indeed the world was altered. That never again would the rain be equal, and by the time they realized it and had run their roots deeper, clutching the earth like lost boys found, it was too late. The men had already folded the earth where there had been no fold and hollowed her where there had been no hollow, which explains what happened to the river. It crested, then lost its course, and finally its head. Evicted from the place where it had lived, and forced into unknown turf, it could not form its pools or waterfalls, and ran every which way. The clouds gathered together, stood still and watched the river scuttle around the forest floor, crash headlong into the haunches of hills with no notion of where it was going, until exhausted, ill and grieving, it slowed to a stop just twenty leagues short of the sea. (*Tar Baby*, 9)

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<sup>10</sup> Morrison, Toni. *Tar Baby*. New York : Plume. 1982.

Morrison does not romanticize the Caribbean ecosystem. She depicts the ways capitalism harmed that natural ecosystem and indirectly affected locals.

There definitely seems to be an economic status hierarchy among black locals working on the island : an hierarchy which is no longer based on age. As an example, despite his old age, Yardman, the groundskeeper and general lackey of the Street family is treated like a piece of dirt by Sydney and Ondine who consider themselves to be way above him, in terms of their jobs. The same applies to Thérèse, Yardman’s wife. Thérèse used to be a former wet nurse on the island, but the invention of formula put her out of business and almost caused her to starve. Since, no one cares about her.

*Tar Baby* portrays the Caribbean island of Isle des Chevaliers as far from natural. With this novel, Morrison exposes, fictionally, the worries of the inhabitants of the Caribbean islands whose native lifestyle is dramatically impacted by the aggressive destruction of the ecosystem and the establishment of a new order by the invader.

In *A Mercy*<sup>11</sup>, the reader discovers that Jacob Vaark also acquired the land by clearing parts of “wilderness”, forcing thus natives to leave their dwelling and finding precarious shelter “behind the felled trees,” (*A Mercy*, 10). Natives are now labeled as “felon[s],” “runaways” or “starving deserter[s]” (9), by the one (Jacob Vaark) who dispossessed them from their land. As the narrator points out, “the primary people” are now considered as people who “owned nothing, certainly not the land they slept on” (45).

Contrary to the young Lina<sup>12</sup>, Vaark is the perfect illustration of ecological unconscious in Morrison’s ninth novel. He is described as killing trees and shipping them off to faraway countries, ruining thus soil and turning fertile lands into barren ones. (*A Mercy*, 52)

Vaark cuts everything down. He already possesses two big houses, yet he is planning to build a third one that requires “the death of fifty trees”. Vaark is more preoccupied by amassing wealth and gathering properties than by the usefulness of these properties. With this, Morrison brings into the limelight the current issue of green consumerism (preserving and conservational consumption habits) versus overconsumption habits.

The native people in *A Mercy* do not consider Land and other elements of Nature as mere objects, deprived of life. On the contrary, they see the divine souls in any of these elements which they considered as connecting elements, linking them to the divine world (52).

In his attempt to bring Nature under control, Vaark will face

<sup>11</sup> Morrison, Toni. *A Mercy*. New York: Knopf, 2008.

<sup>12</sup> Lina’s words and attitude constantly expresses her “ecological ego,” a term coined by Roszak to describe what he later refers to as: “ethical obligation to our planetary home” in *The Voice of the Earth: an Exploration of Ecopsychology*, published in 1992.

the wrath of the rain (water), the weather and land who refuse to obey his will (47). Vaark’s exploitative consumption habits eventually results in climatic imbalances and leads to his own death at the end of the novel.

As mentioned earlier, the destruction of wildlife and the misuse of natural resources in the fictional Bottom community throughout *Sula* reflects indeed some true historical facts that happened in Ohio. In a similar manner, in *Tar Baby*, the story of Valerian, who has “mongooses shipped to the island to get rid of snakes and rats” (*Tar Baby*, 39), reveals parallel historical realities clearly expressed in Michelle Cliff’s work<sup>13</sup>.

While revisiting the history of the Caribbean island in her book *Free Enterprise*<sup>14</sup>, Michelle Cliff points out the quick transformation of primitive ecosystems and the extinction of some species due to the presence of Mongoose. One could read : “[...] the island was in an almost constant state of reordering. The mongoose from India is brought to the Caribbean to control the wildlife of the canefields [...] The mongoose eats everything in its path [...]” (*Free Enterprise*, 55-6).

Michelle’s work *Abeng*<sup>15</sup> makes the reader more acquainted with the way mongoose quickly destroyed part of the original fauna of the island:

Persistence and speed – these kept the attack of the mongoose going until his approaches and retreats stunned the heavy, by-now weary bushmaster. At the sign of the snake’s acquiescence – a slowing of reflex reflected in glassed-over eyes – the mongoose struck once more, faster and more deftly than before, not retreating this time, but seizing the snake’s head in his jaws and cracking the skull between his teeth [...] The mongoose in Jamaica multiplied rapidly after all the snakes were dead, and then he began to kill the chickens, and the birds, and the wild pigs. One by one she [the wild pig] delivered her babies, and one by one the mongoose seized them and ate them. When the pig had finished and was looking to fasten her babies to her teats and eat the placenta which had followed on their birth, she found no babies, no placenta, nothing at all – and the mongoose had long since disappeared back into the underbush. (*Abeng*, 113-4.)

The analogy with the accelerating decline of the natural world, particularly primitive fauna, in Morrison’s *Tar Baby* is straightforward. As a matter of fact, it is possible to argue that this analogy represents something more than just a rapprochement of similar historical realities expressed by both Morrison and Michelle.

<sup>13</sup> Michelle Cliff is a Jamaican-Caribbean writer who has earned considerable critical acclaim for both her fiction and non-fiction based on her experiences growing up in the Caribbean. Her work provides a vivid account of the life and history in the Caribbean Islands.

<sup>14</sup> Cliff, Michelle. *Free Enterprise*, New York: Plume. 1993.

<sup>15</sup> Cliff, Michelle. *Abeng*, New York: Plume. 1984.

Indeed, Morrison’s eco-vision goes beyond a mere scientific approach of Nature and encompasses both the historical and the religious aspects. The idea that the natural world is home to ancestral spirits and the primary dwelling for the divine permeates her novels and conveys her belief in the interconnectedness of Nature, religion and historical identity. The protagonists in the selected novels see the natural world as the medium that connects the individual to God.

### III. Resistance to Ecological Disasters

Resistance to ecological unconscious is expressed in various ways throughout all the novels discussed. Both elements of the natural world and humans resist to characters that threaten environmental health.

#### III. 1. Nature’s resistance against hegemonic control

Nature, as depicted in the selected novels, is profoundly affected by human activities, but doesn’t appear powerless to fight against its oppressors. Morrison asserts the ecosystem’s resilience in various ways. She uses personification to create a narrative which gives elements of nature<sup>16</sup> a voice and senses that allow them to function as human characters<sup>17</sup>. Hence, operating as human characters, they do not only resist unnaturalness which was brought to their world, but also express their rage and grief against the conquerors’ violation.

The following quotes: “the stars [...] exchanged stares with the moon,” (*Tar Baby*, 6) and “the emperor butterflies observe Jadine from outside” (87) implies that both the moon and butterflies are given human ability of eyesight, likewise the clouds are personified when they are described as “watch [ing] the river” (*Tar Baby*, 9). The river is also personified when portrayed as “grieving,” (9) while the anthropomorphic personification, “water lady” (8) is used to describe water.

There are plenty instances in Morrison’s selected novels that illustrate the struggle of several natural elements against the devastation of the land and its resources.

This fact is most succinctly illustrated by ants in Valerian’s Mexican-designed estates that threaten the island’s environmental health. The hardly controllable tiny soldier ants, “popping up out of the ground”, wreaking havoc on Valerian’s greenhouse. Paradoxically, the candy king who reigns over the island Isle des Chevaliers and controls everything is powerless vis-à-vis these small creatures whose impact on his fabricated empire is huge. As the reader can notice, the sidewalk bricks began to collapse (*Tar Baby*, 284).

Ants stand as an obstacle to a powerful man who appears to be arrogant and aggressive against the whole Nature. Likewise, fog is outside of Valerian’s control, though he exploitatively manipulates everything in L’Arbre de la Croix. “Within the

<sup>16</sup> Water (swamp, river, fog), land, air, sun, trees, hills, ants, bees, butterflies.

<sup>17</sup> In an interview with Bessie Jones and Audrey Vinson, Morrison acknowledged this point as she declared she was “deliberately trying to make a choral witness out of the whole world of nature.” See page 176 of “*Conversations with Toni Morrison*”, edited by Danille Kathleen Taylor-Guthrie and published in 1994.

Street’s home, fog can be read as the water’s refusal to be contained. Despite the alteration of the river into stagnant swamp, the island water remains agentic, permeating even the built environment [...] fogs does not simply enter the mansion, but presides over it, perpetually making its presence known.”<sup>18</sup>

Another example of elements of nature resisting hegemonic control is mentioned in Morrison’s *Paradise*<sup>19</sup> where the narrator clearly exposes the natural world as a tool of resistance and a source of nourishment and wellbeing for the slaves. The most noticeable example of Nature reacting to the capitalistic exploitation and to the effects of slavery on African American can be seen in the image of the intertwined trees that grow out of the banks of a dry riverbed and refuse to bear fruit as a response to American supremacists’ harmful attitudes towards slaves.

#### III. 2. Human’s resistance against human-induced ecological degradation

Son Green, conveys the spirit of ecological resistance or ecological ego, as evidenced by his physical appearance, and both his actions and speeches against Valerian’s world of artifice and established order. In her attempt to describe Son, Ondine declares she sees “Wilderness. Plain straight-out wilderness [in his eyes].” (*Tar Baby*, 192). His hair is described as “wild, aggressive, vicious [...]” (113) and he is frequently associated with wilderness, throughout the novel. These descriptions underscore Son’s relationship to Nature, wildlife.

Similarly, the portrayal of Sula too, give the readers the idea that Morrison belongs to writers who think highly of Nature in their works. In fact, there is an extrinsic relationship between Sula and Nature. The character of Sula is often associated with a rose; “The Rose Tattoo”, because she has a birthmark shaped like a rose. The readers also discover that a “plague of robins” arrives in Medallion just before she leaves, and robins are associated with the season of natural rebirth: the spring.

Not only is Son close to Nature<sup>20</sup> and his appearance “wildlike”, his words too, demonstrate nothing but disdain for Valerian’s artificial paradise. Son fully embodies eco-consciousness. He considers that wild animals are more worthy of respect as human beings than some human beings are: “[...] they all did, and they all always did, because they had not the dignity of wild animals who did not eat where they defecated but they could defecate over a whole people and come there to live and defecate some more by tearing up the land” (*Tar Baby*, 185).

<sup>18</sup> Anissa Wardi, “Loud With the presence of plants and field life: The Ecology of Resistance in Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby*” (P.1-16), In *The Journal of Ecocriticism*. University of Northern British Columbia, January 2011. P.10. Found at: <https://ojs.unbc.ca/index.php/joe/article/viewFile/179/317> (On March, 15, 2018).

<sup>19</sup> Morrison, Toni. *Paradise*. New York: Knopf. 2002, P.89.

<sup>20</sup> In the opening chapters of *Tar Baby*, the reader learns that Son arises out of the wetland. In the closing paragraph, he returns to where he belongs: the jungle ecosystem.

Son stands against the imperial exploitation of the land and the over-exploitation of its resources, exemplified by Valerian's paradisaic empire. It's worth mentioning that because of Son's intrusion in Valerian's household during the Christmas dinner, the power relationships and hierarchy in the Valerian household are finally overturned, helping the butler (Sydney) and the cook (Ondine) to speak openly and honestly, for the first time, and express their real feelings to their employer.

Son is also associated with nature and fertility. He causes Valerian's plants to blossom.

Morrison's creation of characters who develop ecology awareness and speak out against the misuse of natural resources reflects her own increased consciousness of Nature and its importance in the equilibrium of the society. It is not accidental that in *Tar Baby* the surname of the character that takes a strong stand against ecological uncounsciousness is "Green". Indeed, Morrison successfully shapes characters by using narrative skills such as naming.<sup>21</sup>

As pointed out by Anissa Wardi in her article<sup>22</sup>: "It is fitting that Son's surname is Green, for he greens the environment of L'Arbre de la Croix, bringing an understanding of the natural into the Street's world of artifice."

It is not consumption of the Earth's resources that causes Morrison's eco-conscious characters to stir up, but the devastation, abuse, misuse and destruction that results from the exploitation of such resources. Otherwise, consumption of natural resources is a natural and expected action.

In *Song of Solomon*<sup>23</sup>, with Milkman Dead's travel to Shalimar in the South, one discovers a lot more about the southern lifestyle which is based on farming and hunting. The community in Shalimar merges with Nature. So do hunters and farmers. They are respectful to the elements of nature. "[Hunters] know the lay of the land and make it work to their advantage." (*Song of Solomon*, 10). They hunt to strictly provide food for themselves and their families. Simply put, it is hunting for survival, not to sell animals' skin to the fashion leather industry to make a profit.

Though the surrounding bush swarms with wild cats and other animals, the hunters and their dogs, came back from hunting with only one "wild-cat slain" (*Song of Solomon*, 11). This attitude is diametrically opposed to the greed of the capitalistic fashion industry that slaughtered ninety baby seals to produce a coat out of their skin for Jadine, a Sorbonne graduate and fashion model.

"[...] Jadine went to the bed where the skins of the ninety baby seals sprawled. She lay on top of them and ran her fingertips through the fur." (*Tar Baby*, 77-8) The 'murder' of the baby seals does not seem to move Jadine, who, on the contrary, loves the sealskin coat. She licks the fur and finds it "seductive" (77).

<sup>21</sup>Usually, much of what we learn about the characters we learn through what they do. Yet, characters' names are of great significance; they reveal a lot about them. They are often direct reflections of the characters and their personalities. That is the case, for instance, for Son Green.

<sup>22</sup> Anissa Wardi, op. cit., P.2.

<sup>23</sup> Morrison, Toni. *Song of Solomon*. New York: Knopf. 1977.

The paragraph above raises, again, the issue of the exploitative consumption habits that threatens natural life, unlike green consumerism which promotes, as Roszak pointed out, an ethical "responsibility to the planet"<sup>24</sup>.

For eco-warriors in Morrison's selected novel, Nature functions as a living body, as a spiritual body. Nature is the place to go for healing, for therapeutic recovery. It is during her total immersion in nature that Lina, for instance, finds a solution to her problem. There, she "cawed with birds, chatted with plants, spoke to squirrels, sang to the cow and opened her mouth to rain" (*A Mercy*, 46-47). Conversely, in the same novel, Vaark dies prematurely as a result of "killing trees without asking for their permission."

## Conclusion

This paper attempts an ecocritical enquiry into Morrison's selected novels. It aims at showcasing how the nonhuman world is encoded and voiced in these novels, and how the author tries to create an awareness of ecological wisdom necessary for understanding and solving the ongoing environmental challenges.

Examples of ecology tragedies abound in Morrison's selected novels. In all, it appears that these tragedies that perturb social equilibrium are the products of ecology unconsciousness which is mainly exemplified by the misuse of natural resources and by the frenzied and the uncontrolled production supported by unbridled capitalism and greed.

Throughout her selected novels, ecological uncounsciousness is met with resistance from the non-human and the human world. Both elements of the natural world and humans resist to characters that threaten environmental health.

Though Nature is profoundly affected by human activities, it doesn't appear powerless to fight against its oppressors. Morrison asserts the ecosystem's resilience in various ways: she gives elements of nature a voice and human senses, so as to allow them to operate as human characters and resist hegemonic control. Human characters too, convey the spirit of ecological resistance and eco-consciousness, evidenced either by their physical appearance or by both their actions and speeches against the progressive establishment of an unnatural order.

Morrison's creation of characters with impressive ecological ego, who speak out against the misuse of natural resources, reflects her own increased consciousness of Nature. Her depiction of the destruction of wildlife and the abuse of natural resources in the fictional communities in *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, *Tar Baby* and *Paradise* reflects indeed some true

<sup>24</sup> This concept is at the core of Roszak Theodore's book *The Voice of the Earth: an Exploration of Ecopsychology*, published in 1992. In this book, Roszak claims that we must relate to planet as if it were an intentional personal presence with whom a relationship that involves an ethical obligation to reciprocate the generosity of the planet. And if we don't do that, this may amplify the ongoing ecological global crisis.

historical facts that happened in America and in the Caribbean islands in their recent development. Nevertheless, Morrison’s ecocritical vision goes beyond a mere scientific and historical approach of Nature and includes a religious aspect. The idea that the natural world is home to ancestral spirits and the primary dwelling for the divine permeates the selected novels and conveys Morrison’s belief in the interconnectedness of Nature, religion and historical identity.

A detailed examination of the selected novels of Morrison, in the light of ecocriticism, reveals that the author persists a strong ecocritical stance in her texts and rejects the idea that Nature should be considered mindless, inert and as an exploitable resource to be harnessed for human needs only. She offers some solutions to ecological devastation, based on faith in Nature-based goddess spirituality. For Morrison, an ecologically harmonious world can only be built with the restoration of belief in the spirituality of Nature and not in the Marxist materialist conception<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup>Karl Marx mainly cared about industrial growth and the development of economic forces; he was not that much preoccupied with the changing human relationship to nature.