



## **Toni Morrison's Home: an Ecolinguistic Analysis**

Shruti Das, PhD

Professor of English, Berhampur University

& Naba Kumar Chanda,

Research Scholar, Berhampur University

### **Abstract**

Since the publication of Arran Stibbe's critically acclaimed book *Ecolinguistics: Language, Ecology, and the Stories We Live By* (2015), a new approach to ecolinguistics has emerged, one that focuses on how much ecologically constructive or destructive views are included in the discourses contained in the "stories" that people "live by" every day. Toni Morrison, expanding the possibilities of African American ecological writing, explores the healing impact of nature that is reflected in the "stories" the characters "live by" in her novels. Her writings build a narrative frame in which nature is the benefactor and healer. On the one hand the narratives poignantly and painfully expose the psychological or emotional wounds suffered by the African-Americans and on the other depict nature as a healer of these wounds. Our concern in this paper is Morrison's novel *Home* (2012). It is a story of a veteran soldier, Frank Money who returns home, with traumatic war memories deeply entrenched into his mind, to rescue his sister Cee from the clutches of a doctor who was abusing her body. The siblings are ultimately healed by associating themselves with and communicating with other members of their community and nature. This paper will apply Stibbe's theory of ecolinguistics and look at the stories and narrative discourses in Morrison's *Home* to see how the ecology of language in the narrative posits that living in harmony with nature produces a healing effect.

**Keywords:** *Ecolinguistics, Ecosophy, Nature, Harmonious living, Healing, resilience*

### **Introduction**

Language enables us to react to our surroundings, and most importantly,

allows us to contemplate the very core of who we are. It is fundamentally viewed as a tool for communication and is crucial for displaying social and cultural behavior of individuals and community. Literature is more complex than mere communication embedding in various styles and narrative discourse abstract ideas and philosophies that the author wants to portray. Nanson has rightly stated that “Words have power. Linguistic analysis demonstrates how verbal messages contained in speech and writing condition what people believe and thus what they do” (Nanson 1). A development in language studies called “Ecolinguistics” gained currency in the late twentieth century. In fact, it came into being as an idea in the stream of academic criticism in 1990 with the aim of finding and establishing a connection between a community’s language and the natural and cultural environment that sustains its survival and growth. The goal of ecolinguistics is to analyse the language a community uses critically and analytically with the intention of connecting it to the environment. The emphasis is on finding the ideas that, in certain socio-political circumstances, influence how we relate to our surroundings. Ecolinguistics introduces several types of approaches, each of which has a specific method of analysis of texts with a definite goal to be achieved. The latest approach, is the one by Arran Stibbe described and theorized in his book *Ecolinguistics: Language, Ecology and the Stories We Live By* (2015), which tends to focus on discourse rather than the language system as such. Stibbe claims that Ecolinguistics

Essentially consists of questioning the stories that underpin our current unsustainable civilization, exposing those stories that are clearly not working, that are leading to ecological destruction and social injustice, and finding new stories that work better in the conditions of the world that we face. (Stibbe 3)

He further says that it is the “stories we live by” that implicitly reflect the views, mentalities, and belief systems of people and the larger community regarding nature and the entire ecological world. By analysing the stories contained within the text, the fictional representation of the people and society, we come to know how the people think about the world. Stories are cultural events and cognitive structures which over a period of time condition the mind of people and influence their social and individual behaviour and outlook.

The stories are questioned from an ecological perspective with reference to an ecological framework (or ecosophy), and judged to be beneficial in encouraging people to protect the ecosystems that life depends on, or destructive in encouraging behavior which damages those ecosystems. Ecolinguistics attempts to make a practical difference in the world through resisting destructive stories and

contributing to the search for new stories to live by. (107)

Stibbe proposes that “discourses can be divided into eco-beneficial discourses, eco-ambivalent discourses, and eco-destructive discourses” (184) depending upon their function within the ecology of the discourse. The narratives that contain stories of sustainability and narrates harmonious living in tune with nature and community is referred to as eco-beneficial narratives. The ecological philosophy of ecolinguistic analysis is therefore, to identify groups of narrative traits that work together to tell inspiring tales about people and their interactions with nature.

Toni Morrison, the much acclaimed African American writer with a voice to be reckoned with, has used language as a powerful medium of expression for the characters in her novels. She uses language subtly as a tool that not only has the power to heal and comfort the victims of traumatic experiences, but also to retrieve the suppressed experiences and emotions of individual from their past. Commenting on Morrison’s used of language Oprah Winfrey says, “She was a magician with language, who understood the power of words. She used them to roil us, to wake us, to educate us, and help us grapple with our deepest wounds and try to comprehend them” (qtd. in Kapitan). In an interview, Toni Morrison herself acknowledges that language bears the hallmark of the distinction of her fiction:

The Language, only the language. The language must be careful and must appear effortless. It must not sweat. It must suggest and be provocative at the same time. It is the thing that black people love so much – the saying of words, holding them on the tongue, experimenting with them, playing with them. It’s a love, a passion. Its function is like preacher’s: to make you stand up out of your seat, make you lose yourself and hear yourself. The worst of all possible things that could happen would be to lose that language. (Morrison, ‘The Language Must Not Sweat’ 301)

Although Morrison is not explicit regarding nature and her novels do not directly or prominently depict human nature interaction, her writings are replete with implicit statements and views in which nature has a significant role to play. In fact, in a 1981 interview in ‘The New Republic’, she expressed just how much fascination she had for nature. Morrison confesses:

that I sometimes lose interest in the characters and get much more interested in the trees and animals. I think I exercise tremendous restraint in this, but my editor says, ‘Would you stop this beauty business.’ And I say, ‘Wait, wait until I tell you about these ants.’ (“Toni Morrison: The Art of Fiction” 83)

Her writings build a narrative frame in which nature is considered a source of

remedy in which people find a healing touch for their psychological and emotional wounds. In some of her novels like *The Song of Solomon*, *Tar Baby*, *A Mercy*, and *God Help the Child* she narrates past memories that reveal harmonious living on the ground of a deep connection between people and nature. The metaphors and discourse used by the characters and narrator point towards a profound associative relationship between people and nature in metaphorical, spiritual and literal levels.

Morrison's characters attempt to understand and build an identity for themselves is the very core of the stories in the tapestry of her novels. The manner in which she narrates her stories and depicts the incidents the characters encounter and experience in their lives reveals a particular world view which can be explained through the basic normative philosophy of ecolinguistics. The relationship between her characters' belief systems and their view of nature forms the basis of the ecological concern in her novels. According to Stibbe, it is the 'stories-we-live-by' that are not only very powerful to reveal the mindset and views of the people of a community but also in bringing about a change in certain belief systems that are destructive for nature and community (4). Morrison's stories portray a world that is "very much like villages in which kinship ties are woven into dreams, legends, and the subconscious of its inhabitants" (Christian 1). She believes in the ancestral African tradition, that the natural world is as important as human actors. "Nature and the ecological world are the participants in the maintenance of the folk tradition. It is one of the necessary constants through which the folk dramatize the meaning of life, as it is passed on from one generation to the next" (2).

The principal normative philosophy on which ecolinguistics relies is to find out and promote the link and connection between people and nature in all its aspects. This bond acts as a strong force to liberate people from different kinds of pain and suffering, like cultural degradation, racial oppression, sexual abuse, and other physical and mental trauma. Morrison's characters imbibe some essence of ecological consciousness in order to lead a harmonious life on this earth. The ecologically conscious characters in her novels are attached to nature and native culture, and thus overcome oppression to some extent. Nature in Morrison's novels has curative and therapeutic power for physical and mental illness. People who are in communion with nature get a healing touch for their ailments. Nature energizes and refreshes the mind, body, and soul of the people who go to it. In her novels, Morrison presents characters who are drawn towards nature as positive round characters who heal and grow. They in turn become healers.

## Home

Since its publication, Morrison's novel *Home* has attracted critics who have analysed and studied it from multiple perspectives, primarily from the perspectives of characters and their identities, feminist theory, racism, space politics, and narrative methods. Some researchers have analyzed *Home* from postcolonial perspectives and others the notions of home, community, and alternative spiritualities as spaces of healing and empowerment for black subjects. A few articles have investigated the different traumatic experiences and post-traumatic stress disorder as well as the journey of recovery from trauma, the impact of war and subsequent dislocation. Mark A. Tabone's article 'Dystopia, Utopia, and "Home" in Toni Morrison's *Home*' posits that Toni Morrison's work is motivated by an idealistic desire that is clearly depicted in the narrative of *Home*. Alice Ferreira, in her article 'Spaces of Resistance: Heterotopia and Dystopia in Toni Morrison's *Home*' demonstrates how Toni Morrison's novel *Home* can be seen and evaluated as a work in which the place of African American people in American society may be viewed as "both heterotopic and dystopian" in light of spatiality studies (3). Little or no significant research has been done on the environmental discourse in *Home*. Despite the fact that Morrison hasn't demonstrated any clear and direct awareness of ecological and environmental issues in the major corpus of her writings, *Home* contains ample instances that indirectly suggest her deep concern for the theme of nature and the environment as an instrument that promotes and initiates healing and recovery from both physical and mental trauma and sickness. This paper attempts a close reading of *Home* from the perspective of ecolinguistics to analyse and explore the interaction between humans and nature, as well as the stories of culture and tradition that the locals practice and live by. Behind the story of homecoming, there is Morrison's desire and longing for peaceful harmonious living in balance with the ecosystem.

This paper makes use of Arran Stibbe's theoretical model of ecolinguistics as articulated in his book *Ecolinguistics: Language, Ecology and the Stories We Live by* (2015) as a tool of analysis to investigate how much ecological consciousness of harmonious living is there in the stories the characters live by in Morrison's novel *Home*. Furthermore, this paper tries to bring out the healing impact of nature and natural objects on the characters suffering from various prolonged physical and mental illnesses due to cultural, racial, and physical bruises. It also explores the inextricable role and connection of nature to oppressed human beings in general and black African American people in particular, as reflected in the narrative of *Home*. Frank Money, the protagonist, is a twenty-four year old Korean War veteran who

belonged to a peaceful little village called Lotus in Georgia. Frank is introduced as a patient in a mental hospital due to post-traumatic stress disorder where he gets an anonymous note urging him to rush to Atlanta, Georgia, to save his sister Cee from abuse and near death. Cee was physically and mentally frail and emotionally dependent on her brother. After being abandoned by her husband, Cee had sought employment first as a kitchen assistant and then as an assistant of Dr. Beauregard Scott who was a eugenicist. He sterilized local women and experimented on Cee. Frank manages to escape from the hospital with the help of some clergymen and reach his sister in time to rescue her from the clutches of the doctor.

Cee is restored to health by Miss Ethel and the women in the community in Lotus. Miss Ethel not only helps Cee recover her health but also instills confidence and strength in her. In the narrative nature and the ecological world are presented as having deep therapeutic and regenerative capacity which African American people have always recognized. Brian Goodwin in his book *Nature's Due* (2007) argues that

If communities are important in the health of individuals, then there should be evidence that the relationships people have with one another are significant in their resistance to, and recovery from, disease. Detailed evidence for this is provided by the American doctor Dean Ornish in his book *Love and Survival* (1997). He provides copious evidence from a variety of detailed studies demonstrating that the most powerful factor in the incidence of illness, premature death from all causes and recovery from serious medical conditions in contemporary society is the pattern of relationships between people. (55)

Goodwin's argument holds good in case of Cee, who is healed by the women in the community of Lotus. In the framework of the narrative a great portion of healing begins in the welcoming community of Lotus, the native homeland and its rural surroundings. The women of the village cure Cee in the most ingenious and naturalistic way possible. This natural approach helps to create an eco-constructive experience. The raw materials of the natural landscape's plants and wildlife, which are composed of green leaves, serve as Cee's healing tools. Family and community support are essential in helping trauma sufferers manage their lingering traumatic memories as well as reinforce their self-esteem. Cee is cared for and nursed to life by Ethel and the other women of Lotus. Their earnestness, compassion, and concern come so naturally and with such spontaneity that it supports Cee in regaining health with physical and mental stamina so fast:

Cee was different. Two month surrounded by country women who loved mean had changed her. The women handled sickness as though it were an affront, an illegal, invading braggart who needed whipping. They didn't waste their time or the patient's with sympathy and they met the tears of the suffering with resigned contempt. (121)

Collectively, Morrison's characters engage in specific rituals that ultimately serve to increase one's sense of self-worth and foster a kind of connectedness between African Americans and the natural world that also helps in healing emotional scars. In the narrative, trees play a compelling and important part in healing. They represent liberation, regeneration, healing, and life. They create the hope of survival outside the barren wasteland of enslavement. They are linked to life and death as well as ancestry. Most importantly, the tree is thought to be synonymous with life which contains the life force that permeates and animates the universe. The emotional association of human and nature is subtly depicted in the narrative when an elderly man named Crawford refuses to leave his home when the Moneys and other black families are forced to leave theirs. He was executed and then hanged from the oldest magnolia tree in his yard. We read:

Just after dawn at the twenty-fourth hour he was beaten to death with pipes and rifle butts and tied to the oldest magnolia tree in the country – the one that grew in his own yard. May be it was loving that tree which, he used to brag, his great-grandmother had planted, that made him so stubborn. In the dark of night, some of the fleeing neighbors snuck back to untie him and bury him beneath his beloved magnolia. (Morrison, *Home* 10)

This tree is a symbol of resilience, tenacity, and endurance as well as a cultural heritage that linked the elderly man with his ancestors. His neighbours buried him under his favourite magnolia. The tree became a major symbol of healing and recreation. The tree represents not only the value of heritage and freedom but also the forces of resistance and regeneration. Michael J Cohen in his Dissertation titled "Educating, Counseling and Healing with Nature" (2008) cites Kay Milton who "speaks of the value of knowing nature through experience, stating: experience is the impact of the environment on the individual. So by focusing on experience, we direct our attention to the relationship between the individual and their environment. It is within this relationship, ... that development of an individual, including development of their knowledge, takes place"(76).

Like the trees which stand erect bearing with and rising over all the hardships and wounds, Frank and Cee, who have attained communion with

nature, also find their home and return to it. In Morrison's narrative, trees are not only supposed to give "shade and comfort" to those who would be sitting under the "sweet bay tree", they also have their "branches spread like arms" like a true friend who would ease out all the pains and miseries (118). The associativeness of phrases like "shade and comfort", "sweet" and "branches spread like arms" with the human subject form cognitive structures that influence the mind. The countryside's natural surroundings occupy a significant space in Frank and Cee's memories. The siblings used to spend time sitting by the local stream, leaning against a bay tree that had been struck by lightning and had two large branches that spread like wings. Its encircling shape has a clear symbolic importance: it cares for and nurtures the young children who are raised as orphans. Nature's mother figures, trees, "stretch their branches like arms" to comfort and give roots to people who have been uprooted and exiled (130). Frank's memory of the peaceful and tranquil Lotus landscape is incredibly vivid, thereby creating a mental model that associates peace and happiness with the environment of Lotus.

In her story, Morrison tells us about African Americans who spend their lives in a way that contradicts the objective view of science which is always detached and far from the particular organic process of healing the wounds that the black women in the community practised by keeping themselves closely associated with the powerful elements of nature. Living in harmony and close contact with nature brings about healing for Cee:

The final stage of Cee's healing had been, for her, the worst. She was to be sun-smacked, which meant spending at least one hour a day with her legs spread open to the blazing sun. Each woman agreed that that embrace would rid her of any remaining womb sickness. (124)

At first, it brings a feeling of shock and embarrassment for Cee when she comes to know that this kind of natural way of treatment would require her to undress herself completely and stay in this state in the open air for a prolonged hour. Later, she was convinced of the significance and power of natural elements to cure human ailments: "The important thing is to get a permanent cure. The kind beyond human power" (124). The benevolence of nature that cures Cee points at the ecological function that plays a vital role in human lives if they live in harmony with nature. Cee's prospective recovery is suggested by the narrator as "the flower which will wither without sunshine and will regain vigour and vitality nurtured by the sun" (125). This story of human-Nature harmony powerfully reflects the core ecological principle of ecolinguistics, which argues that when people and nature are in harmony the world's harmony will be preserved .



Cee is treated by Ethel and the other black women, who also guide her on the road to self-acceptance and love. These women understand from their innate cultural and ancestral body of knowledge that simply treating the girl physically will not cure all diseases; she also requires treatment that will make her mentally strong and resilient in order to remove all the traumatic memories from the mind. They encourage her to fight for self-definition and aid in the development of her sense of self. Throughout her healing, Cee develops her confidence and independence. "She had been branded early as an unlovable, barely tolerated 'gutter child,' and agreed with the label and believed herself worthless"(129), but ultimately it is the native people and the community's support that act as a healing instrument that help her overcome trauma and develop self-esteem and life force, giving her a renewed sense of empowerment.

At the end of chapter four, Morrison introduces an important symbol which has a strong ecological implication. Cee and her friend Sarah are referred to as "melon". Morrison's portrayal of the scene is a perfect example of her elevating ecologically harmonious living through language in the narrative process. "When Sarah picks up a male melon, she snorted. While when she lifted a female one, 'well, hallelujah'" (98). Sarah joined Cee's laughter with a low chuckle: "always the sweetest. Always the juicest, can't beat the girl for flavour; can't beat her for sugar" (99). In order to demonstrate the confluence of women and nature, Morrison actually connects the tenderness and sweetness of females with the delicacy of the fruit while speaking about the melon. Sarah uses a long, sharp knife to slice the female melon. The melon is clearly a referent for Cee, and its cutting represents Cee's pain as a result of the doctor's knife. Morrison deliberately makes the scene, when Frank carries Cee away after saving her, poignant by comparing Cee with the tired, drooping dogwood blossoms which fall off. We read: "Some dogwood blossoms, drooping in the heat, fell as Sarah shut the door" (117). Cee is the flower, a black woman who is used in an unethical medical experiment, is depicted by the imagery of dogwood flowers falling and dying.

Another potent metaphor for the source of strength for healing is gardening or nurturing a garden. Miss Ethel, the woman who looks after Cee the most, draws her life's spirit from cultivating and nourishing the saplings. This life force gives her the fortitude, compassion, and nourishment she needs to aid in Cee's recovery. Miss Ethel is seen tending the garden as Cee arrives to meet her. She is proud of her garden. In actuality, tending the garden is how members of the community make a living. Miss Ethel's therapeutic power emanates from her aggressive love of nature expressed in her attitude as a gardener.

An aggressive gardener, Miss Ethel blocked or destroyed enemies and nurtured plants... Under her care pole beans, curved, then straightened to advertise their readiness. Strawberry tendrils wandered, their royal-scarlet berries shining in morning rain. Honeybees gathered to salute *Illicium* and drink the juice. Her garden was not Eden; it was so much more than that. For her the whole predatory world threatened her garden, competing with its nourishment, its beauty, its benefits, and its demands. And she loved it. (130)

The community women take care of their gardens in the most organic and creative way possible by “using vinegar-seasoned water to kill slugs and crushed newspaper to scare off brazen raccoons” (131). Ecolinguists support a specific type of narrative in daily life that encourages human integration with the environment rather than its exploitation and annihilation through industrialization and modernization.

### **Conclusion**

Language is developed into a potent tool that strengthens the narrative elements Morrison employs in her novels. Various normal and everyday occurrences in nature are described in *Home* in such a potent and provocative way that they force cognition. The narrative structure is strengthened by using personifications to give life to inanimate nature while depicting the landscape of Lotus. Frank, who joined in the Korean War and has been estranged from the Lotus community for a long time, discovers something calming in his native landscape. It plays a vital role in gradually healing the physical wounds and the trauma of ghastly war. On his bus journey home he looks out of the window and finds empathy in nature. The landscapes appear to him as melancholic as his traumatized self. "From the windows, through the fur of snow, the landscape became more melancholy when the sun successfully brightened the quiet trees, unable to speak without their leaves" (19).

Brian Goodwin holds that “During the course of the Renaissance, however, there emerged a conception of art that separated it from science and technology, a separation that has remained firmly embedded in our culture despite attempts to reunite these activities in areas such as design, craft, social art, and architecture. Art in its modern conception has become the domain of subjective creativity, the exploration by the individual of forms of self-expression that reflect current trends of cultural experience and thought” (131). The cultural fragmentation brought about by science and technology has been subtly addressed by Toni Morrison. She throws bare the stark polarity between scientific healing and natural wholesome healing of individuals. She

writes about nature as though it were spirited with living things that actively participated in the daily activities of community members. Nature, with all her elements, becomes a living agent and makes the world suitable for the harmonious living of human beings. In *Home*, Morrison elaborately weaves a web of nature and human beings. She explores the relationship between the natural environment and human beings in a subtle and implicit way. Nature's benevolence and empathy benefits people and community, while its malevolence represents the harm it can cause to humans. Analyzed from the perspective of ecolinguistic theory, *Home* illustrates the harmony between humans and nature with depictions of a garden, fruits, and other natural objects. African Americans, both individually and collectively, experienced trauma dating back to the era of slavery. Morrison shows the healing paths taken by her characters as they move from victims mentally and physically broken to self-sufficient, wholesome human beings. The ecology of language used by Morrison in the narrative points out that subjective experience in nature and community is as real as any objective scientific phenomena.

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