



LITERARY QUEST

An International, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access, Monthly, Online Journal of English Language and Literature

Feminist Views in Toni Morrison's Novel *Sula*

Ms. C. S. Kanthimathi

Researcher, Department of English, LRG College for Women, Tirupur,
Tamil Nadu, India.

Abstract

Toni Morrison is one of the foremost contemporary African-American women novelists awarded Nobel Prize for literature in 1993. She examines individual conscience, reality identifying the new affiliation to his or her history through different perspectives hoping if she is true to her experience, it will be universally meaningful dealing with diversity, division, politics, pop culture above all emphasizing significant feminist views hitherto unobserved by other feminist writers. Morrison's fictional characters could be analysed from feminist views because they confront with cultural issues of gender, class as well as race. She brings into focus the feminist views of black race as they are voiceless people. She advocates that they should thwart white feminist views forced upon them which created the worst social disorder in the human society. She believes that both the black and white can live together once they overcome the race consciousness and colour discrepancy recognizing the feminism from either side as one or equal.

Keywords

Toni Morrison; *Sula*; Feminist Views.

Toni Morrison is one of the foremost contemporary African-American women novelists awarded Nobel Prize for literature in 1993. She examines individual conscience, reality identifying the new affiliation to his or her history through different perspectives hoping if she is true to her experience, it will be universally meaningful dealing with diversity, division, politics, pop culture above all emphasizing significant feminist views hitherto unobserved by other feminist writers. Morrison's fictional characters could be analysed from feminist views because they confront with cultural issues of gender, class as well as race. She brings into focus the feminist views of black race as they are voiceless people. She advocates that they should thwart white feminist views forced upon them which created the worst social disorder in the human society. She believes that both the black and white can live together once they overcome the race consciousness and colour discrepancy recognizing the feminism from either side as one or equal.

Morrison seems to have realized this awful truth by the time she comes to write her second novel, *Sula* (1973). The major predicament she considers in this novel is, therefore, two-fold – the effect of racism upon black identity and black woman. Despite its periodic inclusions of its racial concerns and its feminine identical incorporation of class-related issues, the novel begins and ends with an exposition of individual rather than group fulfilment. Sula, the protagonist of the novel, suffers not only at the hands of whites but also at the hand of blacks. That is why she rejects the traditional role ascribed to women in society. Here Morrison is interested in the struggle for individual rights, in general, and women's rights in particular, rather than in the rights of African people, collectively.

Sula is striving for her identity by her individual feminist views, which is denied to her because of being a black and a woman. Traditionally, women's lives have been organized and manipulated by patriarchy in all ages and cultures. It is uniformly believed that wifehood and motherhood are dual crowns of womanhood. And if a woman chooses to define herself other than a wife and mother, she is condemned as reactionaries to destabilize society. Morrison has beautifully depicted these women rebels. Chief of those rebels is Sula who is the most significant and an offensive character ever portrayed, who shoots many unanswerable questions due to her feminist views. The novel is based on the friendship of two black girls – Sula and Nel from their childhood, growing up together in a small Ohio town, Bottom, their sharply divergent paths of womanhood, their ultimate reconciliation. They have radically different personalities as Nel is quiet and unassuming, while Sula is spontaneous and aggressive. Sula challenges the much propagated True Womanhood in striking feminist views. Collins comments on this concept as follows: “According to the cult of True Womanhood that accompanied the traditional Family ideal ‘true woman’ possessed cardinal virtues, piety, purity, Submissiveness and domesticity (1)”. The ideals of ‘True Womanhood’ are used today also to control African- American women. Collins argues that in their life “these controlling images are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal and inevitable parts of everyday life”.

About their friendship Morrison says “She [Sula] had been looking all along for a friend ... the other half of her equation [Nel] (*Sula* 121)”. Readers may wonder why Morrison and critics stress so much about Sula and Nel's friendship? They are not stressing the friendship existing between the two, but stressing the combined feminism as one feminist view. As black females, all freedom and triumph were forbidden to them, they had to set about creating something else to be. That is a new but one joint feminist view-venture of theirs to be launched. Nel is everything for Sula. Sula tenderly protected Nel under

her strong wings. Such is her feminist-friendly view. An episode speaks for this fact. Four white boys entertained themselves by harassing black girls. They caught Nel once.

Sula reached into her coat pocket and pulled out ... paring knife ... she slashed ... the tip of her finger. Sula raised her eyes to them. Her voice was quite. 'If I could do that to myself, what you suppose I'll do to you. (*Sula* 54-55)

Arrogant boys bolted away. This selfless feminist love that Sula exhibited towards her was enjoyed by Nel, but not reciprocated which disheartened Sula. Nel Wright weds Jude Greene. After the marriage when the bride and groom were alone, "She [Nel] raised her eyes to him ... she saw through the open door a Slim figure in blue, gliding ... down the path toward the road. Nel could tell that it was Sula (*Sula* 85)".

The struggle for self-identity – feminist view without Nel is unknown to her. One man Jude by marriage just deprived off Nel from her. Their combined feminist views-ventures collapsed. Sula lost her respect for men, marriage, wifehood and motherhood, which had taken away her dear Nellie from her. Like a tusker turned out from its herd, as it devastates the surroundings licking its wounds, Sula rushed to avenge men rebelling against all conventions goaded by her me-ness. Sula left Nel and her community. Morrison defines,

She [Sula] lived out her days exploring her own thoughts and emotions giving them full reign feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her. As willing to feel pain as to give pain, to feel pleasure as to give pleasure, hers was an experimental life. (*Sula* 118)

This crazy rush turned Sula into a threat. She emerges as a sinister force, sex hungry, man stealing, a figure of darkness and betrayal. When Sula was away from Bottom for ten years, speculation arises as to where she had gone, rumours swirling about that she was assimilating into white society and, most

vile, that she was sleeping with white men. Harding points out “Sula’s only chance for survival lies within the community ; outside is the threat of annihilation”. The freedom that she achieves is as much a prison as it is liberation. Stepto says, “... a rule breaker, a kind of law breaker, a lawless woman ... she is perfectly willing to think the unthinkable thing and so on”. After a decade Sula returned to the Bottom bringing along a bad omen. “Accompanied by a plague of robins Sula came back ... (*Sula* 89).

On seeing Sula, God fearing, superstitious and innocent people were struck with fears. When she met her grand-daughter after a decade, worrying about her future ruined by rumours Eva asked, “When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It will settle you. I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself (*Sula* 93)”. By secluding her grandmother in an old-people’s home, Sula challenges history. Morrison in an interview with Stepto said, “And also, Sula did the one terrible thing for black people which was to put her grand-mother in an old folks home ... you take care of people”.

Sula did another terrible thing. She took revenge on Jude, Nel’s husband, who was the root cause for Sula to part Nel. She bedded with him. Sula’s and Nel’s friendship was shattered. Jude abandoned Nel. Nel with three children was left in lurch. She fell in love with Ajax. She is convinced that Ajax is her better-half that she always looked for. Sula who toyed sex and lust became a possessive conventional woman, loving to live in her community obeying its rules and her man. Sula becomes attached to Ajax and starts to expect his presence. Taking interest in her own looks, she starts to clean the house and prepares a meal for him.

Ajax is a man who does not want the responsibilities of family life, he wants his freedom. Detecting the scent of the nest, Ajax lost attraction and abandoned her. She who proudly used and ruthlessly threw men was overthrown at last. Wrath shook her for a moment in her former feminist view to avenge Ajax. But she did not try. Because falling in love for once she became

pious forever. Nel still sees Sula as her enemy, but goes to visit Sula because the latter is sick. To Nel, Sula represents shame and loss of love – loss of her love for Jude and even her love for her children who become a chore for her after the break-up of her marriage. She is still angry at Sula for not seeming to understand the consequences of her actions;

Why I can do it all, why can't I have it all? You can't do it all. You a woman and coloured woman at that. You can't act like a man. You can't be walking around all independent – like doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don't. You say I'm a woman and coloured. Ain't that the same as being a man? I don't think so and you wouldn't either if you had children. Then I really would act like what you call a man. Every man I ever knew left his children. (*Sula* 142-143)

Sula's refusal to comprehend how she is supposed to act according to the gender codes in society illustrates the severity of the conflict between her and Nel, a conflict created by their different family backgrounds and feminist views. Suranyi comments on this conversation, "how it illustrates how Sula , in her own way , tries to put up ... a rebellion against racism and sexism". It is clear that Sula sees herself as independent and identifies herself with masculine rather than feminine behaviour. Such is her perverted feminist view.

With the loss of Sula and her free self-styled feminist views jeering at the conventional society, handling men as mere sexual toys, Morrison criticizes the feminist doctrines of unconditional freedom. For Morrison, feminism does not mean emotionless as she believes that women need boundaries to have order, in a disordered world. What she suggests is to strike a balance between self-knowledge and narcissism warning the carefree woman against their propagated feminism that feminism is not the sexual freedom.

Works Cited

- Agnes, Suranyi. "The Bluest Eye and Sula: Black Female experience from Childhood to Womanhood." *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*. Ed. Justine Tally. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007. Print.
- Morrison, Toni. *Sula*. London: Vintage Books, 2005. Print.
- Patrica-Hill, Collins. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Employment*. 2nd Ed. New York: Routledge, 2000. Print.
- Robert, Stepto. *Intimate Things in Place: A Conversation with Toni Morrison*. Ed. Danile Taylor Guthrie. Mississippi: UP of Mississippi, 1994. Print.
- Wendy, Harding and Jack Martin. *A World of Difference: An Inter-Cultural Study of Toni Morrison*. New York: Routledge, 2000. Print.

MLA (7th Edition) Citation:

Kanthimathi, C.S. "Feminist Views in Toni Morrison's Novel *Sula*." *Literary Quest* 3.1 (June 2017): 1-7. Web. DoA.

DoA – Date of Access

Eg. 23 Aug. 2015. ; 05 April 2017.