

Tribhuvan University

Black Feminism in Toni Morrison's *Sula*

A Thesis Proposal Submitted to the Department of English, Faculty of
Humanities and Social Sciences, Ratna Rajya Laxmi Campus, Tribhuvan
University, in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of Master of
Arts in English

By
Yam Prasad Nepal
Roll No.: 322

Introduction

Feminism is the belief and aim that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men. It is a movement for women's liberation and to achieve the same rights and opportunities as men. The term 'black feminism' is related with the feminist activities for the uplift and emancipation of black women. Traditionally, female manners were purely the invention of patriarchal social and cultural institutions. Men took possession over women's bodies, values and attitudes. Women have victimized by sexist oppression. Though they have occupied the half of the world, they do not exist at all in the patriarchal society. The word 'feminism' always refers to the well educated and privileged class of white women. The existence of all the non-white women are totally ignored the selected groups of white women are victimized by sexism but it is not pressing political concern of black women. They are concerned about economic revival ethic and racial discrimination. White women are ignorant of the impact of race and class on their lives. They do not have knowledge or understand the life and experience of black women. When black women participated in the feminist groups, white women looked at them and seemed to suggest that the women's movement was 'theirs'. Black women were not treated as equals. Their presence in women's movement did not count. They could not criticize the movement nor could they introduce new ideas their voices were turned out silenced. They could be heard only if their statements echoed the sentiments of the dominant white feminist discourse.

Sula is the most remarkable novel where the novelist has created black female characters to raise the issue of black feminism. The novel describes the painful situation due to racism and sexism. The novel focuses on black women who grow to reside a larger world and struggle to achieve independent identity beyond the male domination and sexual oppression. Black women suffer from discrimination by Black and White not only from the male but also from female in African American community. The female characters are dominant in this novel. Black feminism is the main concern of the novelist. Main characters—Eva Peace, Sula Peace and Nel Wright are the suppressed women of the patriarchal African-American

community. They are involved in the struggle against the patriarchal black community for their identity and autonomy. They want to have full control over their lives by themselves. They do not want to be guided or controlled by others. Sula, the protagonist of the novel violates every norm and values of the community and goes to college, gains knowledge and experiences of the world. She does the thing that is denied by the black community. Eventually, she experiences her life with full autonomy.

Statement of Problem

Sula is considered as a black feminist novel. The black community of Bottom is organized in this own framework of beliefs. People always try to bring everything within the framework of their world view.

When one reads *Sula* from feminist perspective, many problems are emerged. Morrison has created black female characters to depict the black feminism. What does Morrison have in her mind while creating such a black female character like Sula who is bold enough to reject to be a mother and goes against the role prescribed by her patriarchal black society? Why does Sula refuse the subsidiary role of soothing the black man's wounded masculinity? Besides, Sula another female character, Eva, embodies some traits giving rise to the feminist study of *Sula*. Hannah, Sula's mother, sleeps with as many men as she can, is she prostitute? These questions are the most significance to raise the issue of black feminism.

Hypothesis

Sula advocates for the liberation of Black women, and explores the minds of women who seek to stay outside the constraining sexual, racial, economical and cultural condition of the patriarchal society.

Significance of Study

To understand modern feminist theory *Sula* is rich enough carrying the possibility of feminist study. Critics have put forward many interpretations of different aspects of *Sula*. In my prospective, in the study of *Sula* has included not only the gender issue but also the racial one.

Different ideology and environment of Black Feminist Movement are additional knowledge to understand Black feminism. It is a helpful work to understand Afro–American culture as whole.

Review of Literature

Toni Morrison has written *Sula* in 1973. After the publication of *Sula*, the novelist has been faced various comments about it. This novel has become the focal point of critics. Critics like Addison Grayle denied the feminist elements of *Sula* focusing on its national movement, but other critics such as Jean Vargas Coley admitted to the feminist reading of *Sula* which is seen as a critique of male principle and institutions of heterosexuality and reproduction. It is seen as a single irruption of black female writing which articulates black feminist emphasizing on racial and sexual constraints on black women. Morrison tried to bring up the concerns and experiences of black female distorting the masculine literary discourse in which all these concerns are absent. *Sula* therefore, is so sharply discontinuous from the dominant tradition of African American literature Hortense J. Spiller writes about *Sula*:

The single most important irruption of black women’s writing in our era. I am not claimin for this novel any more than its due, *Sula* is not a stylistic innovation. But in bringing to light dark impulse no longer contraband in the black American female’s cultural address the novel inscribes a new dimension of being , moving at last in contradistinction to the tide of virtue and pathos which tends to overwhelm blackfemale characterization in monolith of terms and possibilities. I regad *Sula* the character as a literal and figurative breakthrough toward the assertion of what we may call, in relation to her literary “relatives”, new female being.(210)

For Spiller the character *Sula* is alien in traditional black Aesthetics. In fact, *Sula* provides spaces to explore the mind of a radical feminist In this novel, the female members are doubly marginalized because of the racism and sexism in the African American community.

Sexual exploitation is mainly focused in the novel. There is not the value of Black Aesthetic.

Madhu Dubey writes

By Black Aesthetic standards, the novel's inability to represent a new revolutionary black community would certainly constitute an imaginative and political figure. The black community presented in the novel is moored to the oppressive past and is, therefore problematic from a Black Aesthetic standpoint when we are first introduced to the Bottom neighborhood in the beginning thing of the novel; it has already a thing of the past. In fact, racial and economic oppression appear to be the necessary conditions for the existence of a distinctive black folk culture. (81)

In this novel the female characters are trying to create their 'self' by freeing themselves from the established patriarchal norm. Eva Peace becomes author of her 'self' taking control of the story and her image. Sula Peace, who understands characters herself very well in comparison to the other characters because of her college education. She is an outcast and her status as a woman without a man and a woman without children. The Bottom community is not habituated to understand the life of women which is led by Sula. She is asked to have some babies to settle herself by her grandmother Eva from the side of whole community but she denies values and norms existed in the society. Describing Sula Valerie Smith has depicted the black feminist approach. Smith writes:

Sula centers on a character who believes that she can create for self an identity that exists beyond community and social expectations. She thus defines social restraints with a vengeance. She disavows gratuitous social flattery, refusing to compliments either the food placed before her or her old friends gone to seed, and using her conversation to experiment with her neighbors' responses. Worst of all in her neighbors' judgment she discards men, black and white as rapidly as she sleeps with them, even the husband of her best friend, Nel. (276)

Nel Wright and Sula Peace are childhood friends. They become too intimate friends.

Some critics go further arguing as Barbara Smith does, that *Sula* can be read as a lesbian text.

Smith says:

It works as a lesbian novel not only because of the passionate friendship between Sula and Nel but because of Morrison's consistently critical stance toward the heterosexual institution of male, female relationship, marriage and the family. Consciously or not, Morrison's work poses both lesbian and feminist questions about black women's autonomy and their impact upon each other's lives. (175)

In the novel, Sula has presented many aspects of feminine struggle and their relationship among themselves. Female characters are dominated, discriminated and exploited by the male domination system. Sula, the protagonist challenges the constraints of black community over black women. Sula, unanticipated black female character in Black literature represents new black female identity neglecting all kinds of domination and exploitation. There is sense of black feminist protest in her reactions and deeds.

Methodology

The research method will be intensively text base. Black feminist literary theory as well as modern feminist theory will be the main tool to analyze the text. Internet sources and critiques on *Sula* will also be used in course of research. Library consultation and related commentaries will be supportive materials. Guidance from professors and teachers will be further inspiration to bring the thesis into its complete shape. As this dissertation is the research of the text, the text book will be the primary source for research. The chapter division of the whole thesis will be as follows:

Chapter Division

1. Introduction
2. Black Feminism
3. Black Feminism in Toni Morrison's *Sula*
4. Conclusion

Works Cited

Dubey, Madhu. "No Bottom and No Top:" *Oppositions in Sula Newcase Books:*

Toni Morrison. Ed. Linden Peach, New York: Martin, 1998. 70-88.

Morrison, Toni. *Sula*. London: Vintage,1998.

Smith, Barbara. "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" *Feminist Criticism and Social Change*.

Eds. Judith Newton and Deborah Rosen felt. New York: Methuen Inc, 1985. 3-17.

Smith, Valerie. "Song of Solomon: Continuities of Community." *Toni Morrison. Critical*

Perspectives Past and Present. Eds. Henry Louis Gates.,Jr and K..A. Appial. New York:Amistd: 1993. 274 -283.

Spiller, Hortense J. "A Hateful Passion, a Lost Love. *Toni Morrison.Critical Perspective Past*

and Present. Eds.Hanry Lois Gates,Jr. and K. A. Appial ,New York:Amisted Press

Inc,1993.210- 235.