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The Articulation of Gender Perspective in Toni Morrison's Sula

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Abstract:

Toni Morrison was born on February 18, 1931 in Lorain, Ohio. She was an illustrious African American woman novelist of the late 20th century. She was the first African American woman novelist who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993. Her stupendous literary output revolves, generally, around race, gender, class, sexism etc. Because of being a woman, she has full sympathy for her sex, hence, she is concerned for women's freedom, rights and opportunities. Morrison's novels are termed as 'Liberatory Narratives' in which she aims at projecting black women's lives, especially, by incorporating the person's sense of self, culture, tradition and history. In fact, Morrison's novels are a real portrayal of the lives of blacks delineating their major issues and concerns.

This article aims at making an in-depth study of gender perspective through her second work Sula. In Sula, Morrison's primary focus is on gender. She thinks that black women suffer a double jeopardy in African American society. This double

jeopardy is meant that the problems and needs of black women are different from that of white women and black men.

Key words- *Freedom, Jeopardy, Stupendous, Sexuality, Perspective, Androgynous.*

Fundamentally, Morrison's *Sula* explores black women's lives and their dignity in African American society during the period of general awakening among the blacks. It also helps to set a new agenda for black women's social and narrative possibilities. *Sula* is a "new world black" and new world woman representing her daring spirit and indomitable will against conservative thinking of her community. *Sula* chronicles a community in which black women dominate public and private life, as Mae Gwendolyn Henderson remarks, the "intracultural/racial sites from which black women speak" (24). Eva and *Sula* are so independent that they need not the support of men in order to manage their affairs and yet remain desirable for men. Contrary to female characters, the male characters undergo no development, play no major roles. It is also worth mentioning that the most part of male characters in "immature, superficial, untrustworthy and anonymous, as is suggested by their names- Jude (Judas), Green (naïve), Boy-Boy (infantile), Chicken little (fearful and diminutive), the Deweys (anonymous)". The negative aspects of their names are most visible when juxtaposed with the empowering names of the women. Each man leaves a community of abandoned women.

As an African American woman, *Sula* is a rebel because she lacks parental love and affection. She also abhors those women who blindly follow the patriarchal norms and outdated values in their day-today lives. Her mother Hannah and grandmother Eva were abandoned by their husbands. She herself, too, is a victim of male-domineering society. That is why she rejects the traditional role ascribed to women in society. As a feminist, she defies all social norms forcibly imposed upon women. She has an "intense desire to give birth to herself as a person". Being a

defiant woman of the Midwest, she has no desire to get married or have children. She once claims, “I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself (92)”.

Like Sula, her grandmother Eva Peace, too, represents the class of liberated women who think and feel with their mind and heart at the same time. Eva is an image of the enduring, perspective black existence who possesses the sixth sense to understand the unspoken. The secret of the death of Chicken Little is unraveled to her through her dead son’s soul. This understanding of the occult makes her personality completely free from anxiety, fear, and inferiority. Her strong ethnic strings do not preclude her from being an independent, self-governed human-being. She possesses an androgynous mind which points to the freedom that black American women will enjoy freely in the times to come.

As a self-willed woman, Eva proves wrong the argument of inferiority of woman because of her biology. She refutes the old saying. “Biology is destiny”. She is full of bio-power and weilds it well in her family and society. She bargains economic stability with her leg. The remaining one leg she adorns in a fashion to control the frequent male visitors to her house. She manages her household quite well. Certainly, she gives us an anti-essentialist view of body and sexuality and at the same time she backs up Foucault’s opinion in recognizing the corporeal reality of bodies.

In fact, the novel Sula sets up a new agenda for black women’s social and narrative possibilities. Nel and Sula are close friends but they are different by their instincts and spirits. Nel is cautious and consistent whereas Sula is emotional and adventurous. Nel becomes a slave to sexism and racism while Sula becomes a liberated woman. The standard of womanhood that Nel represents is not a pure image of the ideal lady but one based on the status of working-class black men in the society. This role is seen by Nel’s community as good, while Sula is seen as evil.

For, Sula is interested neither in being beautiful nor becoming a mother. She keeps herself outside the sex, race, and class definitions of the society.

The relationship of Nel and Sula with men seems no stronger than their relationship with their families. Nel marries Jude out of pity for his plight, but when she loses her husband to Sula's careless seduction, she thinks that she will have no other men. As a daughter of a woman exploited by men, Sula uses black men and white men until she is abandoned by the man she loves. Nel and Sula live in a world in which women must survive without men.

In brief, black women are often labeled as racist and sexist. Morrison in Sula shatters this notion. Sula, the protagonist meets freely with white men and the whites finally put her to rest in as decent a manner as possible. She retains her freedom of spirit till the end. In fact, the spirit of Sula lives in every woman who realizes her self-worth.

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