

Gender Analysis in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *Sula*

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Abstract: This paper explores the subject of gender identity in African-American culture where slavery has become an unfortunate issue of the past and still haunts the present. Two major reason of suppression in that culture is being black and a woman. Women strive hard to assert their identity as human beings. Whites or any man could not relinquish the racist opportunity or the gender rights. Gynocritic model of Elain Showalter highlights many problems in literature written by men. She opines that woman's thoughts and subjective consciousness are presented well in the writings of female authors. This model provides an insight for the analysis of gender.

Key words: Gender • Feminism • Gynocritic • Woman • Black • Slavery

INTRODUCTION

Gender is significant in the description of the self. It is the condition of being man and a woman. The term gender may be mystified with the term sex. In a social context, sex is different from gender. Sex refers to the difference between anatomy and sexual organs. It may also refer to those biological traits with which man and woman are born. Gender refers to the socially constructed concepts of masculinity and femininity as well as the socially accepted relationships between man and woman. In Fonow and Cook's view, gender involves the "accounting of everyday's experiences of women which are neglected in the traditional sociology" (p.22). The issue of gender will be analyzed with reference to feminism. Feminist theories focus on gender politics, gender relations and sexuality. Gender tension prevails when woman are traditionally subordinated to man. Man does not intend to relinquish gender advantage. Similarly, white would not intend to eradicate racist advantage.

Elian Showalter's model of gynocriticism is a socio historical investigation. It explores literature on the basis of subject matter, historical background and structure of literature written by women. Gerda Lerner opines that female experiences are of significant importance when we analyze the life of women. Women are displaced of history because "they have considered history only in male-centered terms" (39).

Sula and *Beloved* are written by an Afro-American author, Toni Morrison. She was the first *black* female author to win the Nobel Prize. With the portrayal of Afro-American culture, the condition of women and humiliating effects of slavery are explored in the gender biased society. In *Sula*, three generations of women i.e. Sula, Hannah, Eva represents economically and sexually independent ladies who gain strength from each other in the absence of male member. Sula is presented as a domineering female, intending to live her life as a free being. She refuses to take any responsibility in the name of marriage and her mother dislikes it. Contrary to Sula, Nel is a conventional lady. She tends to follow the authority imposed on her by the society. Helena, Nel's mother is also a traditional lady. Nel and Sula, Though quiet different from each other, evolve the friendship. To Sula, Nel is a personification of "degenerate aspects of conventional female morality. Her mother largely shapes this phrase of Nel's development" [1]. Different ideas of Sula and Nel about womanhood breed different lives. Sula left Bottom and returns after ten years with the charge of sexuality. Folks of the town repeatedly labeled her as an "evil" lady. Afterwards, rift is caused in their friendship by the affair of Sula and Jude, Nel's husband. Community places the whole blame on Sula when Jude plans to leave his place. The situation aggravates by her affair with the white man. Sula, seems merely to reject the social conventions that are taught to her by the family women's. She embraces the stong sense of sexuality and self from

her grandmother, Eva Peace. Eva was left in poverty along with her three children after leaving of her husband. Eva returns to Bottom with one leg and a certain amount of wealth. She is able to provide for children by continuing her role as a determined matriarch. Despite of her physical handicap, Eva, defies the sexually inhibiting gender roles and tend to be openly flirtatious. She challenges the conventional notion of womanhood as well as of motherhood. Contrary to Eva, Helena tries to preach religious teachings to her daughter, so that, Nel could be a traditional and conventional lady. Women of Helena's family live their lives with limited self-expression of these gender identified roles.

In *Beloved*, Sethe is a major character who interlinks the past with the present. Life of free slaves is presented to be haunted by the traumatic experiences of the past. Sethe works in Sweet home but being a slave woman she is treated brutally and raped. She escapes with her two children but lost her husband during this escape. Halle turns mad on witnessing the rape of his wife. Sethe, delivers a daughter on her escape. Amy Denvar, is a white character and she nurses Sethe and her daughter. Sethe has the time of bliss at the house of her mother-in law but this lasts by the arrival of a school teacher. On the sight of School teacher, Sethe resigns to back into slavery and plans to kill her children but she could take life of her elder daughter only, whom she called as Beloved. Sethe's attempt to infanticide is similar to the killing of Plum in *Sula*. In both the novel, mothers try to kill their children from love and not hatred. Ghost of Beloved makes life of Sethe miserable. Afterwards, Sethe realizes that Children are integral part of herself.

Literature Review: Caole Pateman focuses on the feminist researcher who tends to change the status of woman in the patriarchal societies. Patriarchal concept replicates the male dominance on the woman. Pateman views that the domain of patriarchy comprises of the difference among masculinity and femininity that is equivalent to the political difference between the freedom and subjugation (p.207). Woman are suppressed and devalued in the patriarchal culture. By living in the male dominant societies, woman became the object of producing the knowledge. Therefore, one could say that the objective knowledge of the social world is tainted by the biased reasons of the dominating race i.e. male and white. Jones and Stevi writes in *Contemporary Feminist Theories* that gendered hierarchal society questions the male centered ways of knowledge. Feminist theories are about thinking of woman generating knowledge about them and of gender of woman (p.1)

Gilbert and Guber highlight the need of woman to express themselves in the stream of knowledge. Woman tends to have sisterly descendents in the stream of knowledge due to their sense of alienation. The fears of patriarchal authority as well as offensiveness about the female creation are the phenomena that mark the sense of inferiority in woman. "Woman writers struggle for artistic self definition and differentiate the efforts at self creation from those of her male counterpart (p.50). Woman could do the research about females in a better way as compared to the male researchers. As females are better equipped to interpret and evaluate the experiences of the suppressed race of woman.

Furthermore, Helene Cixous suggests in *Laugh of Medusa* that women should write for themselves and bring other woman to writing. They have been driven away from writing as violently as from their bodies (p. 253). An eminent feminist scholar, Dorothy Smith, argues that due to their sex-position, woman could produce better knowledge as compared to man. Feminist standpoint theories has less distorted knowledge and they are more complete (p.44).

Elain Showalter uses the gynocritic theory to explain the experiences and knowledge of woman. She writes, "Its subjects are history, style, themes and structure of writing by woman; the psychodynamics of female creativity, the trajectory of the individual, the evolution and laws of a female literary tradition" (p.310). Furthermore, Showalter examines the history from female aspects in her work, *Towards a Feminist Poetics*. She opines that history is divided into three phases namely, feminine, feminist and female. The female phase is the phase of self-discovery. "Woman turns to the experience of females as source of autonomous art, extending the feminist analysis of culture to the forms and techniques of literature" (p.139). Showalter supports feminist criticism in the female phrase. In *Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness*, Showalter claims that the gynocritic model constructs the framework to analyze the female experiences in the literature by woman rather than the male authors (p.131). Gynocriticism is a way to learn "something solid, enduring and real about the relation of woman to the literary culture" (p.49). It concentrates on the newly visible world of the female culture. Toni Morrison's fictional characters could be analysed from gynocritic view point because they confront with cultural issues of gender, class as well as race. The world still undermines the black woman.

Institution of slavery is eminent in the historical background of *Sula* as well as *Beloved*. Slaves were treated as subhuman creatures and they received punishment as mutilation of the corpse. In Lunden's

opinion, slavery was an odd institution. It was in part justified by the white supremacists. Whites considered slaves as inferior beings due to their race (p.164). Lives of woman slave were much worst as compared to male slaves due to two reasons. Firstly, husbands of slave woman were taken away or sold by the *white masters*. Secondly, black woman were abused and violated through rape. White man kept sexual relations with black woman in order to increase their assets. Kolchin writes, "Sex with whites was against the desire of slaves. Women were the victim of outright rape of the powerlessness that made the resistance futile (p.124). In *Beloved* by Morrison, the sufferings of a black mother, Suggs, are portrayed realistically. Sethe, kills her daughter to keep her away from the slavery. Gender smudging is also due to slavery. It forces the genders to adopt opposite characteristics. Duker views:

- Slavery has emasculated Paul D'. It stole him anhood by forbidding him to take decisions. While, motherly sensibilities as well as femininity is taken away from Suggs. She has to adapt the masculine traits to ensure the survival of her family. Due to the former servitude, these two characters take the characteristics of the opposite gender (Duker, p.110).

Critical Analysis: *Beloved* and *Sula* embodies the gender relations of black African American people. Historical experiences of black African American are used as a background in both the novels. *Beloved* represents the era of civil war i.e. the time before and after the abolishment of slavery. Whereas, in *Sula* characters tend to cope with the haunted pasts and troubled present. In *Beloved* woman is under the burden of patriarchy and slavery while in *Sula* characters have a disparity in their personality. They are trying to manifest the subjective consciousness by struggling hard to cope with their free self. Issues of family, identity and possession are explored by Morrison in a world where slavery is apparent.

Morrison tries to trace the scars of slavery on the psyche and emotions of people of black community. The human psyche has deep impacts on being enslaved due to one's incongruity to establish him as human being. As Sethe points out, "freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" [2]. People were objectified as commodities in the black slave's community. They were deprived of every right to develop their own self. While anyone who tries to assert individuality was rejected by the society. For example,

Sula rejects the conventional values of the society and ultimately she is rejected. It can be argued that *Sula's* survival is possible because of her relations with the members of black community. By refusing to conform to the conventions of the social world, *Sula*, realizes herself. Contrarily, *Nel* realizes herself by conforming to the norm of the society. In *Sula*, characters develop self-centeredness which helps in the defining the self.

Beloved represents inter-relatedness among the individual identity and the communal identity of blacks. Stories of two freed slaves i.e. Suggs and Paul D' are paralleled to analyze the relations among slaves and master slave. Resultantly, declaring the need of an individual to retrieve an identity for them before having the bond with community. In this connection, Morrison condemns the traditional values associated with the white male suppression. She proposes a new gender model for blacks based on the mutual suffering of an imprisoned past and struggle for future of freedom and equality. Struggle of black women for realization of self is eminent in both novels under discussion. It challenges the cultural construction of gender roles by narrative of two women who are employed in a struggle for the realization of self. In the lives of black woman, brutality makes motherhood a two folded burden. Firstly, they have to view their children sold off and experiencing the traumas of slavery. Secondly, most of their children are conceived by rape rather than the matrimonial relations. For example, *Beloved* is not the product of hatred and she wants to wants to restrain her from slavery. As Morrison puts, "whites may make her filthy all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful magical best thing- the part of her that was clean" (p.296). Sethe Suggs tries to keep away her children from the impacts of slavery. A motherly instinct found in her personality claims the ownership of her children. In doing so, Suggs brings devastating effects onto them in severe condition. In matriarchal Afro-American house, *Eva*, accepts her role as a single mother. Her residence is continuously "awry with things, voices and slamming of doors" (*Sula*, p.52). Sex was open in the house and *Sula* learns at an early age that it was "pleasant, frequent otherwise unremarkable" (*Sula*, p.44). *Eva's* approach is divergent to generally accepted notion of motherhood. Black families had to suffer a lot in case of a single parent, facing the inhumanity of slavery. Similarly, *Hannah* is a single parent known for sexual independence. She is highlighted by Morrison as a faultless woman liked by the social world. It could be argued that black mothers confer as well as destroy the life. *Eva* has to scarify her one leg to get the money of insurance for her family. She

also sets her so on fire to exempt him from burning alive. Moreover, Sethe, exchanges ten minutes sex for imprinting *Beloved* on the gravestone of her child, whom she kills.

Due to the impacts of slavery fathers are often absent from the family. Therefore, role of mothers is dominating in these two novels. Morrison repeatedly presents those houses which are run by woman alone. Therefore, such families undergo the traumas of emotional laps and psychic crises. For example, DeLancey views that love of mother becomes emotionally and psychologically toxic in the absence of father. Eva raises three children on her own and we observe financial as well as emotional pressures that childbearing places on disadvantaged African-American mothers [3]. Therefore, one can say that the survival of black community depends on the motherhood. In the social world of slavery, children had to face various psychological drawbacks [4-8]. Enraged children are the central figure in these two novels. Literally, it could be seen in the title of *Beloved* and symbolically in the characters of the novel. The children's unsatisfied needs highlight the relationship of mother and daughter in *Sula* as well as *Beloved* [9-13]. These unsatisfied needs present not only the psychological and emotional needs but also physical needs. For example, *Beloved* portrays the grimmest dilemma of the psychic as well as the physical death. The children were denied from their basic right i.e. the laps of a mother for their psychological growth [14-16]. This psychological deficiency makes loopholes in the subconscious of character. Sethe Suggs grow to an overprotective mother due to lack of love and care which she never gets from her mother and therefore, takes the life of her daughter. The worst experience of slavery makes her to give a physical death to her daughter rather than the psychological death. Sethe speaks, "if i hadn't killed her, she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen her" (p.200). Similarly, in *Sula*, Plum is unable to cope with the present as wish to crawl to the womb of his mother due to the impacts of slavery found in the minds of his family members. Nel, yearns to have a companionship that may lead her to self realization, though her mother is much authoritative [17-19].

The narrative structure of these novels is related to the character's struggle for the path of discovery. It portrays the intricacy in lives of characters. Morrison characterizes mutability and shifting in perspective of characters in time, space and composition. Gyetavi expresses:

- Morrison presents constantly though unexpectedly shifting view points, an unpredictable choir of narrative voices and juxtaposed fragments of events and images that are in dialogue with one another but could hardly form, a straightforward linear cause and effect plot that is a monologue (p.2).

Beloved's narrative structure is constantly shifting perspective of character's mind i.e. mutable, non sequential and with no convention. It has mutability of boundaries and constitutive dialogue between self and other. Nancy presents that fluidity is distinctive in woman and opposed to man's mode of perception as well as expression. The monologue of Sethe, *Beloved* and Dener presents seriousness rather than the flexibility in the boundaries, the complete breakdown of the border between self and the other. For example, Sethe expresses:

- "Beloved,
- She my daughter,
- She mine" (p.200)
- While, *Beloved* speaks:
- "I am *Beloved* and she is mine" (p.210)

These lines highlight the merging of self with other. These lines are without punctuation. Further, *Beloved* expresses: "I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop her face is my own" (p.202).

Her words reveal her psychological urge for tending to merge into the other. These characters articulate as indistinct as well as segregated. They speak but not with one another which highlight's the urge of characters to submerge into the identity of another. For example:

- "Beloved you are my sister. You are my daughter. You are my face.
- You are me I have found you again;
- You have come back to me
- You are my *Beloved*
- You are mine" (p.216).

This form of objectifying the other imprisons the self within its own overwhelming omnipotence. The shared recognition between self and other can result in true satisfaction. One surrenders to the incorporation of the other in the relationship of *Beloved* and Sethe. As in power relations one becomes subservient to another. Sethe, by the end of the novel, presents herself to the power as well as desire of *Beloved*. Similarly in *Sula*, the same sense of becoming an other is significant in the

relationship of Nel and Sula. The intimacy of both the characters is presented in such a manner that they “themselves have problem in distinguishing one’s thoughts from another” (p.83). As Nel speak that talking to “Sula has always been a conversation with herself” (p.95). With the passage of time, Sula realizes that no one could ever be a version of your own self. The relation of being friends becomes eminent in the description of pre-oedipal attachment of infant’s daughter to her mother. The female bonding of two girls in friendship exemplifies a relational mode of self definition and one’s craving for the other.

The technique of defragmentation in *Sula* and *Beloved* portrays the conflict of the self in the process of being another. It also presents the desire of black women to survive in a society that is hostile to their interests. Such narrative mode in fiction is disjointed as well as linked. The narrative evolves along broken lines that are reminiscence of split descriptions, character images as well as plots. Defragmentation technique in *Sula* and *Beloved* enacts a yearning for a genuine self and existential totality.

CONCLUSION

In *Beloved* and *Sula* gender issues play a major role in the definition of self. Women are oppressed on multitudes level due to the reason of gender politics. Firstly, women are oppressed by the patriarchal institution of the social world. Secondly, being a black woman is a double burden. Thirdly, the brutal institute of slavery robs them from the right of motherhood as well as womanhood. Gynocentric perspectives help the readers to probe into the lives of woman in Afro-American social worlds in a better way. Woman tried to exist and play their roles in all the possible ways in household and society whereas, men were either absent from the families or shrunk from their responsibilities. Women have strived hard under the institution of slavery to fulfill their roles as mothers. This realization of self identity is the main craving of feminists and it becomes their predicament in societies where woman are taken as an inferior beings, as commodities with a prize tags. In order to come to terms with themselves, black women, fight for their rights and are cherished members of the black societies.

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