

ISSN: 2349-2147



# Modern Research Studies

Editor-in-Chief  
Gyanabati Khuraijam

**An International  
Journal of  
Humanities and Social  
Sciences**

*An Indexed & Refereed e-Journal*

[www.modernresearch.in](http://www.modernresearch.in)

**Title: Female Consciousness: A Comparative Study of  
Toni Morrison's *Sula* and Nayantara Sahgal's  
*This Time of Morning***

**Author/s: VIJAY D. SONGIRE**

**Volume 2, Issue 3  
September 2015**

**pp. 568–575.**

Disclaimer: The views expressed in the articles/contributions published in the journal are solely the author's. They do not represent the views of the Editors.

Email: [editor@modernresearch.in](mailto:editor@modernresearch.in)  
[mrsejournal@gmail.com](mailto:mrsejournal@gmail.com)

Managing Editor: **Yumnam Oken Singh**



**Female Consciousness:  
A Comparative Study of Toni Morrison's *Sula* and  
Nayantara Sahgal's *This Time of Morning***

**VIJAY D. SONGIRE**

Assistant Professor  
SIES Graduate School of Technology  
Nerul, Navi Mumbai, India

**Abstract:** Toni Morrison one of the most prestigious women writers on the canon of African American literature and the winner of the Nobel Prize deals with the various issues of race, class and gender exploitation in white dominated America. On the other hand, Nayantara Sahgal is a significant voice in the tradition of women writers in Indian Writing in English. Both Morrison and Sahgal have some similarities as well as dissimilarities in their works. The present paper investigates into the portrayal of female consciousness in their work. The paper particularly makes a comparative study of Morrison's *Sula* and Sahgal's *This Time of Morning* and shows that how both of the writers are similar in their portrayal of female consciousness.

**Keywords:** exploitation, sexism, male patriarchy, conventions, female consciousness.

Toni Morrison pens the sufferings and humiliation of the blacks in general and black women in particular. She has given voice to the voiceless in her novels. She gives vigor to the lost self of black women. As Kavita Arya writes: “Toni Morrison sets out in her novels to recover the African American female self, which is mutilated, fragmented or blotted out” (41). Morrison is the only African American woman writer who has portrayed the rising female consciousness in her celebrated novel *Sula*. She tries to paint the character of the female protagonist Sula to open up new avenues for the coming generation of black women. The black women who have long been suffered and humiliated due to racism, classism and sexism stand erect against the male tyranny in *Sula*. Similarly, Nayantara Sahgal tries to portray the predicament of Indian women under the heavy burden of male patriarchy. She is similarly a feminist like Morrison in her depiction of female characters in her novels. Her fictional world is female oriented like Morrison’s. As M. Selvanayaki writes: “Sahgal is the most thorough going feminist among the women writers of Indian English fiction” (276).

Morrison’s women in *Sula* are stronger than any other female character portrayed in the African literary tradition. They break the stereotypes of marriage and motherhood and yearn for individual freedom. Similarly, Sahgal’s women too stand for their own rights. As Dr. Parul Yadav observes about Sahgal’s women characters: “Being a strong upholder of feminist thoughts, Nayantara Sahgal has represented her women characters as torrents hurrying on their way to reach their destination. They don’t worry of the pebbles and thorns in their way and they pave their way to search their quest” (436). Sahgal is against the oppressive male patriarchy which denies the existence of women. She knows very well the ill effect of this social custom upon the psyche of women in the Indian society. She openly expresses her views about the difference in the culture of the East and the West. She advocates the Western ideology of freedom and individuality. She writes in *Prison and Chocolate House*: “In the West, the emancipation of women

brought about a change in their appearance. Short skirts and cropped hair became the order of the day. But the appearance of Indian women has on the whole remained unaltered...They still wear their graceful saris, proving that an efficient job can be done in very feminine-looking attire” (67-68). In her novel *This Time of Morning* Sahgal throws light upon the predicament of Indian women who faced the orthodox male patriarchy. The women are not allowed to live life freely. On the contrary, they are looked like a commodity for marriage. In the novel the protagonist Nita wants to live the life of her own but her desire is crushed down under the heavy burden of male patriarchy. Her family members don't allow her freedom. Under the name of protection, her right of freedom is lost and she is a silent sufferer in the novel. Morrison's *Sula*, *Nel*, *Eva* are similar to Sahgal's *Nita* who faces male patriarchy in the respective society.

Morrison portrays the women characters like *Eva*, *Hannah* and *Sula* who break the social norms. Being mothers *Eva* and *Hannah* are the women who do not follow the conventions as well as the social norms of the society. Following the footprints of her mother, *Sula* too behaves in the unconventional manner. She breaks all the rules that reflect the community's traditional values. She becomes a pariah in her own community living outside the laws and codes of the community. *Sula* is a rebellious woman in several ways. She rejects the ideology of other medallion women. She is not interested in getting married and to settle down. She does not accept the role of a woman just as a homemaker and limited for a family. She lives out her own fantasies and creates her own realities. She is very possessive to set her own personal objectives. As she confesses to her close friend *Nel*, “I got my mind and what goes on in it” (43) Morrison portrayed the character of *Nel* as a woman who follows the social codes and conducts of the society. *Nel* represents those African American women who are suffered under the name of marriage and motherhood. On the contrary, *Sula* represents a woman who rejects traditional notions of family, marriage, babies and grand parental care. Her life shows her negatives attitudes towards the notions of feminine responsibility. Her grandmother *Eva* who is the ultimate follower of patriarchy wants *Sula* to follow the social norms as she tells *Sula*, “When you gonna get married? You need to have babies. It'll

settle you...” (92). But on the contrary, Sula does not want to settle down. She revolts against such subordination of woman, saying: “I don’t want to make somebody else. I want to make myself” (92). She refuses to see women as only wives and mothers. Morrison puts forth the African American women’s struggle for individual freedom. After the death of her husband, Eva takes all the responsibility of the house and asserts herself. Her character is also one of the most significant characters that show the awakening female consciousness. Eva Peace has to shelter her daughter Hannah when she loses her husband Rekus as well as Plum when he returns from the war. She is a caretaker of the family. Mohini Chakranarayan observes about her: “Eva can be called the ideal of the archetypal great mother” (66). She has a nice combination of understanding of the traditions as well as the ability to flout them when situation demands. She echoes in the character of Sula who too like her has the spirit to face the obstacles in life individually. Sula is considered as evil on account of her relationship with white men. However, she stands erect against all odds. When her friend Nel condemns her for her act of betrayal by sleeping with her husband she does not regret. However she says: “What you mean take him away? I did not kill him, I just fucked him. If we were such good friends, how come you could not get over it?”(145) Thus, both Eva and Sula assert themselves in their own way. As Chakranarayan says: “Eva Peace and Sula Peace can be named as crusaders who tried to prove that women can manage their own affairs independently without the support of men and yet remain desirable for men” (107).

Individual freedom is actually a primary focus of *Sula*. Morrison’s women want to emancipate themselves from all kind of bondages in the society. Sahgal’s Nita too like Morrison’s Sula and Eva tries to discover her own self. She rejects the values and social norms imposed upon her by the traditional society. She gets attracted towards one of the males namely Kalyan, a minister. She has a desire to live her own life like Sula of Morrison’s. She finds solace from all tensions in the company of Kalyan. Both Morrison’s Sula and Sahgal’s Nita are similar in their yearning for man’s love. Sula seeks the company of Ajax. Even she enjoys love making with him. Morrison has portrayed the sexual relationship of Sula with Ajax, her lover very boldly. It reflects the

changing image of African American woman who is now ready to shatter all the bondages of patriarchal society. Both *Sula* and *Nita* being unmarried are the appealing characters who are the true examples of female consciousness. Morrison writes about *Sula*’s attempt to fulfill her sexual desire in her own way. As she writes about *Sula*: “...she focused her thoughts to bar the creeping disorder that was flooding her hips. She looked down; down from what seemed an awful height at the head of the man whose lemon–yellow gabardines had been the first sexual excitement she’d known” (130). Similarly Sahgal’s *Nita* does not want to follow the traditional ways and behavior. She visits *Kalyan*’s house frequently and expresses her love for him:

But don’t make me go.” He rose from his chair, “*Nita* ...” She got up, too, and came like a sleep walker into his arms, clinging to him. “Don’t make me go, please don’t make me go.” He took her by the hand and then to his room. (152)

Her behavior shows the changing image of Indian woman who is ready to break all the social restraints imposed upon women by Indian society. *Nita*’s pre-marital relationship with *Kalyan* shows her attempt to live a free life. Her desire to have company of a man is similar to *Sula* who seeks love from *Ajax*. *Nita*’s parents represent the power structure of male patriarchy in the society that does not allow freedom to females. Mrs. Narang says: “We don’t allow *Nita* to go out alone. Her father would not hear of it” (30). The Narangs’ concern for the safety and protection of their daughter illustrates their conformity to traditional values. However, *Nita* has a thirst for doing something, and does not want to be bound by nuptial knots yet. She requests *Rakesh* one of the character in the novel to influence her parents in the matter: “I don’t want to marry at all just yet. Now you’re back, *Rakesh*, do persuade Mummy and Daddy I should have a job. It’s ghastly doing nothing” (32). Later her parents do allow her to take up a job, but for a very different reason. *Kalyan*, a Minister, had offered the job and they simply didn’t have the heart to refuse a Minister’s offer. However, *Nita* looks for something more than merely a job; she strives for independence and her individual identity. She thinks: “a job was never

enough [...] A job led to money and freedom, and freedom demanded a flat of one’s own away from the prying eyes and inquisitive voices” (148) of men and women who do not permit women to gratify their basic needs of self-fulfillment. Nita is a woman who does not believe in arranged marriage. She feels unhappy with Vijay whom she is engaged. She feels that such a marriage will not provide her with emotional security. Vijay sees her as a commodity rather than as an individual. Her cry for individuality is similar to Morrison’s *Sula* who seeks freedom in the company of her lover Ajax. Morrison’s *Sula* creates new pathways for the women in general and African American women in particular. As K. Sumana observes: “*Sula* opens up new literally and critical option not only for the study of the text by African-American women, but for African-American literary study more generally. The novel certainly helps to set as new agenda for black women’s social and narrative possibilities” (67). Sahgal shows the developing consciousness of the females who are ready to stand against the male tyranny and social customs which limit women’s existence as Mohana Sundari asserts that “Sahgal’s heroines are well aware of the injustice done to them in their marriage and they come out of this traditional bond. Their walk out reflect the social changing conditions during the 20th century. In spite of being deep-rooted in Indian culture, they care and yearn for personal freedom and have their own identities” (447).

Both Morrison and Sahgal have shown in the respective novels how marriage and motherhood limit women’s existence. In *Sula* Eva, Hannah and Nel are the victims of this age old custom of male patriarchy. They do not get man’s love throughout their life. Nel is a woman who believes in marriage and motherhood. She does not even imagine about sex without her husband, Jude. Unfortunately, Jude betrays her by sleeping with her close friend, Sula. Morrison develops characters like Sula who flouts this age-old ideology of marriage that crushed women’s freedom and individuality. Syed Mujahid aptly writes about the novel: “*Sula* is not only a positive image of black woman but she also symbolizes a universally positive image of womanhood. She is a powerful character portrayal by Toni Morrison, which is filled with feminine consciousness. Her portrayal raises a kind of consciousness in black women. Sula, through her caliber rejects the male dominated

white cultural norms” (94). Sahgal too, like Morrison, is of the view that marriage does not provide women freedom. “Sahgal seems to expose conventional narrow-minded Indian society through the character of Nita. In Indian society, the parents choose life-partners. The parents arrange for the two young souls to live happily ever after. Sahgal strongly attacks this social convention and names this kind of marriage “just organized rape” (Selvanayaki 274).

Thus, both Toni Morrison and Nayantara Sahgal have done an outstanding attempt in *Sula* and *This Time of Morning* respectively. They give voice to the voiceless and provide new vigor and vitality to female identities. No doubt Morrison’s *Sula* stands high to Sahgal’s *This Time of Morning* but Sahgal’s attempt also cannot be neglected. The respective novels are the true documents of female consciousness promoting the idea of freedom, individuality and women empowerment.

### References:

- Arya, Kavita. 2014. *Blackhole in the Dust: The Novels of Toni Morrison*. New Delhi: Adhyayan Publishers.
- Chakranarayan, Mohini. 2008. *Toni Morrison Sula: A Critical Study*. Bareilly: Prakash Book Depot.
- Morrison, Toni. 1976. *Sula*. London: Vintage Books.
- Mujahid, Syed. 2014. *Black American Predicament in Toni Morrison’s Fiction*. New Delhi: Author Press.
- Sahgal, Nayantara. 1970. *This Time of Morning*. Delhi: Hind Pocket Books.
- Selvanayaki, M.. 2014. “The Plight of Women before Marriage in Nayantara Sahgal’s *This Time of Morning*.” *Language in India*, 14.10: 282-296.



Sumana, K. 1998. *The Novels of Toni Morrison*. New Delhi: Prestige.

Sundari, Mohana. 2013. “Awakening of New Consciousness in Sahgal’s Women.” *International Journal of English and Education*, 2.3: 446-450.

Yadav, Parul. 2015. “A Journey of Female Characters from Emotional Alienation to Inner Illumination.” *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities*, 3.3: 436-441.