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

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

Managing Editor: **Yumnam Oken Singh**



## **Toni Morrison's *Sula*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli*: A Study on Gender**

**VIJAY D. SONGIRE**

Assistant Professor

SIES, Graduate School of

Technology

Nerul, Navi Mumbai, India

Email: [vijaysongire2@gmail.com](mailto:vijaysongire2@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** Toni Morrison, the most celebrated African American woman writer and the recipient of the Nobel Prize, advocates the idea of feminism in her works. Her novels collect the varied experiences of African Americans in general and African American women in particular. On her literary canvass she exposes the vulnerable status of women (black) on the account of gender. Arundhati Roy, the winner of the prestigious Booker Prize is a significant literary voice in the field of Indian writing in English who attacks upon the social evils like casteism, gender discrimination etc. Rama Mehta (1923-1978), winner of Sahitya Akademi Award was a successful sociologist and a writer who threw light upon the subordinate status of women and their marginalization in orthodox Indian society. The present paper particularly studies Toni Morrison's *Sula*, Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli* and shows how these writers have similarly portrayed a feminist voice in their novels. The paper investigates that how women either in America or India are humiliated, exploited and marginalized. The respective novels have strengthened the female voice where women stand against the set social customs, norms and culture.

**Keywords:** Feminism, sexism, exploitation, patriarchy, empowerment.

African American women who faced the triple jeopardy of race, class and gender were completely fragmented. However the galaxy of women writers like Nella Larsen, Zora Neal Hurston, Anne Petry, Maya Angloue, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Gloriya Naylor exposed the social evils like racism, classism and sexism in American society. The place of Toni Morrison is unique in her contribution to African American literature today that depicts the varied experiences of African Americans. She truly documents sufferings, humiliation and exploitation of African American women in her novels. The novel has provided a medium for Morrison to put forth her ideology. She becomes a pioneer of women's African American protest literature who attacks on the age old ideology of racism in her very first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970). She gave a significant contribution to the women tradition. A close study of her novels makes us aware of the maturity as well as artistic talent she has as a writer. As Shaila Bala rightly observes, "Morrison's theory of fiction-writing is a kind of reformative and suggestive approach through which she makes us aware of the existing and excruciating condition of the contemporary society" (76). As a black female writer she has successfully portrayed a very complex and ostracized lives of the blacks. She has handled the various themes like racial discrimination, class and gender exploitation, motherhood, quest for identity, womanhood, etc.

Morrison's *Sula*, the female protagonist in *Sula* (1973) goes far ahead in her attempt to establish her identity in male dominated African American society. She is one of the most celebrated of Morrison's females when it comes to her quest for identity. She becomes a liberated woman in the novel. "If *Sula* had any sense she'd go somewhere and sing or get into show business, implying that her 'strangeness' her 'lawlessness' can only be sanctioned in a world like the theater" (Parker 253). The black community does not accept her attempt of becoming a defiant woman. *Sula* is a woman who tries to form her own identity. She is interested neither in being beautiful nor becoming a mother. Nana Banyiwa-Horne asserts about *Sula* succinctly: "*Sula* is a pariah whose values are often the polar opposites of those adopted by her provincial society. She becomes a pariah precisely because she rejects those values that aim at uniformity and stifle the self" (31). *Sula* turns

out to be a highly individual woman. Though Nel is seen as passive one and the follower of old customs and traditions here was a desire for individual freedom. As the novelist writes: “I’m me,” she whispered. “Me.”

Nel didn’t know quite what she meant, but on the other hand she knew exactly what she meant.

“I’m me. I’m not their daughter. I’m not Nel. I’m me. me.” each time she said the word *me* there was a gathering in her like power, like joy, life fear... “Me,” she murmured, and then, sinking deeper into the quilts, “I want ... I want to be... wonderful. Oh, Jesus, make me wonderful” (28-29). The lines show Nel’s quest for identity. Nel and Sula both are different in their attitudes to society. Though both try to find out their identity their ways are completely different. Nel follows the conventions as well as the social norms of the society whereas Sula flouts them. Sula breaks all the rules that reflect the community’s traditional values. She becomes a pariah in her own community leaving outside the laws and codes of the community. Sula is as 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 Nel, “I got my mind and what goes on in it” Sula represents a woman who rejects traditional notions of family, marriage, babies and grand parental care (43). 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. “When you gonna get married? You need to have babies. It’ll settle you...” (92). But on the contrary Sula doesn’t want to settle down. She revolts against such subordination of woman, saying: She says: “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 people’ struggle for individual freedom. Individual freedom is actually a primary focus of *Sula* .

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). *Sula* shatters all the traditional beliefs set for black women. Sayyed Mujahid writes about her: "She rejects traditional sexual modes as well, ignoring the 'ownership' principle of marriage and operating on the principle that sex is non-competitive and non-threatening" (85). The characters of Hannah and Sula project the idea of female sexuality in the novel. The sexuality, which tries to make women stand against male patriarchy in the community. As Jayita Sengupta asserts about Hannah and Sula: "... a provider of sex like Hannah in *Sula* is universally disapproved of, but never seriously resented by the rest of the community. Hannah contributes to and partakes of the collective male pool while Sula uses Jude to fill a gap within herself" (131). Sula's relationship with her friend Nel's husband Jude also talks more about woman's sexuality. Nel sees them making love to each other. As she narrates in the novel: "But they had been down on all fours naked, not touching except their lips right down there on the floor where the tie is pointing to, on all fours like (uh, huh, go on, say it) like dogs" (105). Sula enjoys sexual pleasure with different males in the novel. People from the community of Medallion do not accept Sula's behavior due to the sexual overtones in her behavior. She does not hesitate to sleep with Jude. Later she is engaged with one unemployed black youth, namely Ajax. They are not genuinely involved in each other. They are just lustful in their behavior. Morrison gives a very subtle depiction of their sexual intercourse: "She put her head under his chin with no hope in the world of keeping anything at all at bay...He swallowed her mouth just as her thighs had swallowed his genitals, and the house was very, very quiet" (131). Sula gives full exposure to her sexuality in the novel. Morrison has shown Sula as a woman who breaks all the existed social norms for black women in the African American society. She tries to define herself in the community where women are subjugated, harassed and exploited on account of gender. Her grandmother Eva, and mother Hannah live life without any support from their husband. Therefore Sula takes control of her own life. However people of the community condemn her. As the narrator writes: They charge that Sula is "guilty of the unforgivable thing...the

route from which there was no way back, the dirt that could not ever be washed away. They said that Sula slept with white men” (112).

The womanhood portrayed in *Sula* by Morrison is one of her outstanding artistic creation, which depicts a black woman's quest for identity in its truest form. Sula becomes a role model for women who stands against the falsehood of set norms courageously. Her friend Nel loses this opportunity to create the selfhood for which Sula strives hard. So Nel cries at the end of the novel after knowing the essence of Sula's character: “All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude. And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat ‘We was girls together’, she said as though explaining something. “O Lord Sula,” she cried, “girl, girl, girl, girl, girl,” I was fine cry- loud and song- but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow” (149). Nel's cry indicates her grief over the death of her soul mate Sula to whom she could not understand throughout her life. Her cries also indicate the true female bonding between two women in the community. Another mournful incident in the novel is the death of Chicken Little, one of the characters in the novel. In this respect, Sandeep Pathak observes: “Sula is an intensely elegiac novel about loss, grieving, and the release of pain.” Sula's attempt turns into a failure when Ajax, her lover deserts her. Though Sula's attempt turns into a failure her ability to breaks the stereotypes of women is remarkable. Sula presents a new model for African-American women. It concerns with the fallings and affairs of women and the roles they assumed through the portrayal of the characters Sula and Nel. Morrison not only exposes the oppressive economic as well as social system in America but also shows the inability of black women to escape from the social convention and tradition of the community.

Arundhati Roy's female protagonist Ammu in *The God of Small Things* (1997) is treated as a subhuman and second sex. Her humiliation takes terrible forms when she returns to Ayemenam as divorcee. Rahel and Estha, as children of a divorcee woman have no place in the orthodox society. They are suppressed and suffered at home and in the society for no fault of them. Like Velutha they too lead a life of the marginalized. In the novel Ammu is compelled to have an easy taste of chauvinistic brutality and hypocrisy through her father. No one is

serious about her education. Ammu's father Pappachi is of the opinion that "a college education was an unnecessary expense for a girl" (38). On the other hand her elder brother Chacko goes to Oxford for education. When money is not enough, Ammu's mother Mammachi secretly pawns her jewelry to send him abroad. On the contrary Ammu's education is denied. This indicates how woman is neglected and sub-humanised in the male dominated society. Patriarchy made women as marginalized. Her eighteenth birthday comes and goes away unnoticed. Since her father has no suitable dowry no marriage proposals come for Ammu. This indicates that the life of women in India is made vulnerable due to the patriarchy as well as the social customs like dowry.

Ammu wants to go away from the Ayemenam, so as to escape from the brutality of the male domination. Her plan becomes successful when her father agrees to let her spend the summer with a distant aunt who lives in Calcutta, where she meets her future husband, Baba. She decides to marry him with the hope that marriage will improve her position in society. Her attempt to create her own identity becomes spoiled. Baba, her husband is not only an alcoholic but a liar. Meanwhile, Ammu gives birth to twins, Rahel and Estha. Hers condition becomes more critical when Baba does nothing but lay in bed. Baba in the novel is portrayed as a man who uses his wife for his own selfish purpose. He considers her as a means of fulfillment. His boss at the office, Mr. Hollick wants to enjoy sex with Ammu. Baba does not hesitate to order her to do so. And therefore Ammu takes divorce from Baba, and returns to Ayemenam, but her humiliation has no end. After her return to Ayemenam, no one consoles her but treats her badly. Every one humiliates her calling her a divorcee. Ammu's mother Mammachi is also a victim of male chauvinism. Her father Pappachi does not care about her. He is jealous of the fact that she is seventeen years younger than him. Even her good attempt to start a pickle factory is criticized by him. He is of the view that her job is not suitable to the ranking of an Ex. Government official. He does not help her in her business. On the contrary he takes pleasure in beating her. As the novelist writes, "Every night he beat her with a brass flower vase. The beatings weren't new.

What was new was only the frequency with which they took place” (47).

Besides Ammu and Mammachi, Margaret Kochamma also is marginalized on the account of gender. She is portrayed as a woman who wants to assert her own identity, but after marriage with Chacko her life becomes meaningless. Thus, the women like Ammu, Mammachi and Margaret Kochamma are portrayed as the victims of male chauvinism. It indicates how women are oppressed, humiliated and made to live a marginal existence due to the domestic violence, which is the result of patriarchy. As Rujuta Deshmukh writes, “Domestic violence prevails all over the world but its gravity is much in South Asian countries. Domestic Violence is very much rooted in India. Its age-old system of patriarchy and the patriarchal structures are responsible for that” (Deshmukh 2007). Thus, Roy highlights man’s attitude towards women in our social hierarchy. Women have been seen as means of wish fulfillment. In the novel Ammu and Mammachi are marginalized on account of gender. They are the victims of domestic violence and patriarchy. They have no any fault of their own, the only thing that they are ‘women’. To quote Rujuta Deshmukh:

According to available statistics from around the globe one out of every three women experience violence in an intimate relationship in her life. This is an average based on available national serves across industrialized and developing countries (World Health Organization, 1997). The data reveals a shocking 71.5 percent increase in cases of torture and dowry deaths during the period from 1991 to 1995 reflect increased reporting of violence. (Deshmukh 2007)

Chacko who represents male domination does not care about his sister, Ammu. On the contrary, he asserts himself and is ready to humiliate her. He monopolized both his mother and the Paradise Pickle factory. The presence of Ammu in the house always disturbs him. He denies her share in the ancestral property saying: “What’s yours is mine and What’s mine is also mine” (57). It is indicative of the lower status of women in patriarchal set up of India. Women are denied their



right upon their ancestral property and they are treated lower like the Dalits. Being exploited and humiliated by parents, Ammu becomes a lonesome figure at Ayemenam. Since she is neglected almost by all the members in the family, she enjoys midnight swim and spends her lonely hours on the bank of river. Naturally she gets attracted towards Velutha’s physical feature. As Ashok Chasker rightly observes: “Ammu, a member of Syrian Christian family touchable (but a woman) cannot suppress her biological needs, her sexual appetite. Basically, she is a young widow who cannot go without someone irrespective of his caste and community for satisfying her sexual needs. She is bound to submit to the natural urge for sex and gets sexual satisfaction by Velutha, a member of the Untouchable community” (75). Both Ammu and Velutha the two unwanted and neglected individuals begin to love each other and enjoy short happy life. Since they have no plans, no future all they could do stick to the small things. As Roy narrates: “Even later, on the thirteen nights that followed this one, instinctively they stuck to the Small Things. The Big Things ever lurked inside. They knew that there was nowhere for them to go. They had nothing. No future. So they stuck to the small things” (338).

Ammu and Velutha made love that night when they met for the first time and the next thirteen nights. She does not think of the social barriers. Velutha also is unaware about the future consequences. Ammu, being a woman cannot suppress her biological needs. As G.D. Barche points out: “She [Ammu] has disobeyed the social laws of love but obeyed the instinctual laws ‘Swadharma’ by sharing the body with Velutha, an untouchable” (43). Velutha’s father, Vellya Pappen informs Mammachi about the love affair between Ammu and Velutha. Suppression for ages made Vellya Pappen too weak to stand against the high castes. He does not want to rebel against high-caste Christians. Knowing about their love affair, Mammachi shouts at Vellya: “Drunken dog! Drunken Parvans liar!” (256). Mammachi’s anger is very oblivious. She calls Velutha at Ayemenam and humiliates him. As the novelist writes: “She had screamed, eventually. ‘Out!’ If I find you on my property tomorrow, I’ll have castrated you like the pariah dog that you are! I’ll have you killed!” ...Mammachi spat into Velutha’s face. Thick spit. It splattered across his skin. His mouth and eyes (284). The

love relationship between a high-caste Ammu and Velutha, an untouchable has been seen as disgrace. They both are viciously condemned and punished for their conduct. Nothing was wrong in their behavior. But their relationship is considered as illicit. Her basic need of having sexual pleasure is treated as a sinful act. She is marginalized because of having love affair with an untouchable. In Sophie Mol's funeral all neglect Ammu and her children. In their home they become untouchable. Roy successfully shows the drawbacks of Indian orthodoxies, which outlived women by depicting the Ayemenam realistically. As C. Gopinthan Pilliai rightly points out, "The problems of patriarchal domination and female subalternity and the clash between the two are rooted in the specific geocultural reality of Ayemenam" (88). Baby Kochamma also hates Ammu for her relationship with an untouchable. She shares her body with her. In loving Velutha as untouchable, she does not think of the social barriers. Ammu, being a woman cannot suppress her biological needs. In this respect G. D. Barche rightly points out: "She (Ammu) disobeyed the social laws of love but obeyed the instinctual laws 'Swadhrama' by sharing the body with Velutha, an untouchable" (43). So, here Ammu becomes a taboo breaker woman who breaks all the social restraints of the society. Her act is against the existed norms.

In *Inside the Haveli* (1977), Rama Mehta depicts how Geeta, a city bread girl of Bombay, well to do and educated has to marry a young man of Udaipur. She lives in a tradition bound haveli. She becomes a victim of the male dominated world. The novel focuses on the conflict between tradition and modernity. The haveli represents the Indian tradition and the girl Geeta represents modernity. There is a constant conflict between two antagonistic cities, Bombay and Udaipur. Geeta is born and brought up in Bombay. She had studied in co-educational college and had an exposure to metropolitan life. She comes to Udaipur as the nineteen-year-old bride of Ajay Singh, a professor of science. Ajay's ancestors were the ministers of the Ranas of Udaipur and their haveli, Jeevan Niwas, was one of the biggest and the most prestigious havelis of Udaipur. It is very painful for the educated girl like Geeta to adjust and adapt to the stringent and traditional ways of the haveli, wherein women kept *purdah*.

“Where do you come from that you show your face to the world?” (17). Geeta finds herself suddenly enclosed and engaged in a huge haveli where she is all the time surrounded by women. From a nuclear and educated family she has come to find a horde of maids, their children and women from other havelis who keep visiting one another on the slightest pretext in addition to her mother-in-law and grandmother-in-law. Malashri Lal also believes that the cultural shock faced by Geeta is the result of her movement from theory to practice, towards a greater social reality: “Marriage brought Geeta from the outer world of modernity to the enclosures of the threshold”. (88) Another peculiar and intriguing factor she encounters is that there are different apartments for the males and females of the haveli. The servants have their separate quarters. The upper class women observe strict purdah and do not interact with their men folk during the day. The males conduct their business from their own separate apartments and their visits are announced beforehand. No such rules are applicable to the maids and servants. They intermingle freely and do their jobs: “In their courtyard there is no dividing wall, the maids are free to talk to their husbands; they don’t have to wait till the darkness of night settles over the haveli to share their thoughts with them” (6). Even after two years of her marriage, Geeta has seen neither her father-in-law nor her grandfather-in-law, yet the whole haveli revolves round their needs and demands. Male presence is felt every moment in every nook and corner of the house.

“In the haveli the men were regarded with awe as if they were gods. They were the masters and their slightest wish was a command; women were kept in their shadow and followed their instructions with meticulous care” (21). While her mother-in-law, on the other hand, wanted to show them that “even an educated girl can be molded” (30). It was her mother-in-law’s considerate and sympathetic attitude towards her, and the love and care of her husband that facilitate her adjustment to her new environment. Gradually, she learns and comes to respect some of the traditions, yet her occasional outbursts are clearly indicative of the silent storm of ambiguity inside her. It shows that she is not prepared to surrender her individuality completely. On being reminded by Dhapu, her personal maid, to restrain herself in showing affection

towards her newborn daughter Vijay publicly, she bursts out: “Stop lecturing me, I am fed up with all the pretence that goes on here. . . I hate all this meaningless fuss! Don’t tell me what I should do with my own child!” (32).

Geeta finds herself completely trapped in the haveli with only a ray of hope that her husband might shift to Delhi, as has been promised to her. But time passes and Vijay is now a school going girl. On an impulse, Geeta decides to send Sita, the daughter of the maid Lakshmi, to school. Sita is a motherless girl and exactly of Vijay’s age. Her mother Lakshmi had rebelled against her husband’s false accusations and had left the haveli never to come back. It is for the first time that Geeta comes in direct confrontation with the conventions of the haveli. Education for a servant girl is a very bold decision by Geeta. She gets the support of her father-in-law, while all the servants and the maids of the haveli and her mother-in-law criticize her for this decision. The haveli culture required total and unquestioned submission to its rules and conventions, so the women were kept enclosed within the gigantic walls and married young so that no rebel could raise head. As Rama Mehta herself observes that the educated women are less keen to uphold older values that they find repressive, harsh and mostly meaningless. She says: “The younger generation is looking to maximum opportunities of prosperity and status and is less concerned with maintaining the socio-religious obligations towards caste- community” (159). These women are quite habitual of the tradition and any minor change becomes a heresy for them. Malashri Lal rightly emphasizes: “Mehta points out that upper class educated women must provide the leadership to those born in less privileged conditions. For this they may need to sacrifice some of the modern principles of liberation that they could have grabbed for themselves” (101).

Despite all the odds and criticism, and Geeta’s own ambivalence towards her endeavor the classes continue and, in fact: “Geeta knew that some of the maids were forced to leave the classes, but even those havelis which tried to threaten or discipline their servants encouraged their own daughters and daughters-in-law to go and learn something useful from the classes” (179). Geeta’s efforts bear fruit and she is appreciated by one and all when Sita is married to an educated boy who

has a *pucca* house, land and bullocks in addition to a promising future. Gradually Geeta, too, is able to penetrate the outer shell of rituals and customs and finds underneath it a deep reserve of warm love, care and affection. She learns to respect the continuity, validity and strong emotional ties of the haveli people. All her defenses give way and she finds herself a willing prisoner in the haveli when they give Ajay and Geeta permission to shift to Delhi if they wish to do so. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar's remarks are quite appropriate here: "Although Geeta gradually gets used to its life changing herself in the process, she also subtly changes her immediate environment and the people concerned" (753).

A.G. Khan also believes that the protagonist values modernity without offending tradition: "In the process of silent revolution without blowing trumpets or without offending any she induces her mother-in-law with a feeling of warmth towards modernity" (44). Mehta has shown gradual development in Geeta. In section one of the novel her movements are awkward and clumsy. She is frightened and fascinated by the life of the haveli at the same time. Though she feels suffocated yet she dares not have a whiff of fresh air. She gains some confidence by the time the narrative reaches section II, yet her fascination and her fear of the haveli life turns into resentment and a subtle streak of hatred is also visible in her remarks. Section III, she is confident, and becomes assertive, serene yet a subtle rebel whose existence is reckoned with by the haveli people. Finally she emerges as the new lady of the haveli. Though the novel here ends abruptly, yet there is a promise of a future mistress who would look towards the brighter and progressive side of life and would try to maintain a balance between the centuries old haveli traditions and the demands of modern life.

Thus, Toni Morrison, Arundhati Roy and Rama Mehta give a true portrait of gender discrimination in the respective society. They expose the ill effects of patriarchal society upon the lives of women where they lose freedom. At the same time the respective novels define gender roles positively where women become assertive and stand against the oppressive forces in the society. Morrison's *Sula*, Roy's *Ammu*, and Mehta's *Geeta* are the role models for women who define themselves against the backdrop of patriarchy. The novels are the authentic

documents today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and appeal for equality between man and woman

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