

## **Gender Politics: A Comparative Study of Toni Morrison's *Sula* and Shobha De's *Starry Nights***

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### **Abstract**

Toni Morrison the only woman from African American literature to receive Nobel Prize is a significant woman writer on the canon of African American literature. She reveals not only the sufferings and humiliation of the black women but also the true potential of black women to resist the oppression. Her novels show the rising consciousness among the black women for their own survival. Though they became the victims of triple jeopardy of race, class and gender, they try to find out the ways to overcome it. Shobha De, a significant woman writer in the field of Indian writing in English depicts female sufferings in her novels. Her objective is to defend women rights. Her concern is to highlight the pathetic condition of Indian women under the heavy burden of patriarchy. The women characters in Morrison's *Sula* and Shobha De's *Starry Nights* are fully aware of their own rights being women; still they remain victims of false marriage institution. They try to set themselves free from the age old dilemma of gender discrimination. However, they fail to achieve freedom on the account of male dominated society. The present paper investigates gender politics in respective society where women are treated mere as commodity.

**Keywords:** Gender, feminism, female sexuality, identity, gender politics.

## Introduction

Gender discrimination is a universal dilemma. Women are humiliated, exploited, and marginalized on the account of gender. In human history males always have tried to dominate females. Women became the victims of gender politics in society. Gender politics is the assumptions framed in society that differentiate women from men which considers females weaker to men. Feminism is a movement that emerged with the idea of safeguarding women's rights.

The feminist political movement began in the nineteenth century with a call for female suffrage which advocated women's rights. The movement is divided into three waves according to its different ideology concerned. The first wave refers mainly to the women's suffrage movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in the United Kingdom and in the United States, focusing on women gaining the right to vote. The second wave of feminism that emerged after the World War II and is described as the women's liberation movement. It focused on gaining legal and social equality for women. This period was also understood as a continuation of the first wave of feminism. The third wave feminism which alternatively called as post-feminism begins in the 1990s and continues up to present. Post-feminism refers to the failures or inadequate role of the second wave feminism and it continues in fighting for the same beliefs as in the previous waves. The first and the second wave feminists were mostly from middle-class, whereas the third wave feminists are women from different ethnicities, religions and social backgrounds who gave new vigor and vitality to women's experiences.

Toni Morrison, a true advocate of feminist thought, is a significant female writer in the field of African American literature. She portrays humiliation, exploitation and marginalization of women in general and African American women in particular on account of gender. Her novels give authentic details of gender discrimination due to patriarchy. She empowers women in her most celebrated novel *Sula*. Similarly, Shobha De, an Indian columnist and novelist, is well-known for her

depiction of socialites and sex issues in her novels. She believes in women freedom and gives a very clear picture of women subjugation and exploitation due to age old norms in Indian society. Both writers are similar in their attitude towards women's plight. They want to expose the sufferings and miseries of women. Morrison's *Sula* and De's *Starry Nights* uncover the truth of gender politics in the respective societies.

### **Morrison's *Sula***

*Sula*, a middle aged woman from African American family is deprived of parental love and care turns out to be a rebel. She hurls the age old patriarchal norms which control women's behavior. Her mother Hannah and grandmother Eva were both deserted by their husbands. *Sula* does not want to become a victim of male hegemony. Being a feminist she breaks all the gender codes imposed upon the black women by the black community. She neither wants to marry nor become a mother. She becomes a rebel. She says, "I want to make myself" (Morrison, 1976, p.92). This is *Sula*'s feminist voice or agenda visible in the novel which shows her awakened female consciousness. When she returns to Medallion after ten years she is totally changed. She too, like her mother Hannah, sleeps with men and enjoys sexual pleasure. The people in the community do not accept her affairs with men and consider her a pariah. Her purpose is just to live a life of freedom and joy. She gives importance to sexual fulfillment in her life and therefore gets involved in affairs with men. She even does not think about her best friend Nel. She sleeps with Nel's husband Jude too. Her objective is to control male behavior. The minute study of the novel makes it clear that *Sula* is nothing but a product of the social environment where she lived –a fatherless child who was robbed of motherly love and care, and one who wants to find her own path in the male dominated society. She does not understand the difference between love and lust. Both her mother and grandmother were involved in free sex. So, *Sula* too wants to live her own life. *Sula* becomes a feminist in the novel to fight against the patriarchy.

Besides *Sula*, her grandmother Eva also makes a great impact as per the feminist ideology is concerned. She takes the whole responsibility

upon her own shoulders, and fights in the battle of life when she is deserted by her husband BoyBoy. When she is deserted by her husband she leaves her children with a neighbor for eighteen months. She returns with enough money to support them but with one leg. There is a rumor in the town that she has lost her leg to a train and her money came from insurance compensation. Later, there is an accident where Hannah, her daughter, catches fire. Eva tries her best to save her. She is not a timid one to remain actionless like other women sufferers. She is ready to take action to save her daughter. She hurls herself out of a second storied window to save her. When her daughter Hannah is put outdoors by her husband Eva provides her shelter. She herself is deserted by her husband but she stands erect against all odds and nurtures her children with all careful mothering. It shows her as a woman who has feminist spirit. Morrison has given full exposure to her women characters in this novel that are feminist in approach. They break the gender codes. They do not follow the codes and conducts set for women in the society. Sula as a woman follows her mother's behavior. In *Sula* both Eva and Hannah became victims of patriarchy. Eva's husband left her alone when Hannah was just a child. The same situation is there with Hannah when she was deserted by her husband Rekus. Sula, in order to take a stand against this patriarchy, becomes a self-propagator and listens to her own whims. Besides Sula, her grandmother, who runs the family alone without anybody's support, has feminist characteristics. She is projected by Morrison as a representative of a class of young black women who consider their sex pursuit as the only and ultimate goal of life. Like her mother Hannah, Sula gradually develops a desire for males. The reason behind Sula's sex pursuit is to seek her own individuality in the society. The women were suppressed due to age old customs and set norms. So, Hannah and her daughter Sula try to affirm their own self. Their relationship with different men in the community shows their different paths against the set norms in the society. Sula's love affair with Ajax shows nothing but her indent desire for sexual gratification. She does not even hesitate to sleep with her friend Nel's husband Jude. In the novel Morrison discusses many problems related to women in general and black women in particular. She has shown the actual position of a woman in African American society where she is seen just as an object. She is a neglected figure not only in the society

but also at home. Even from her mother, Sula doesn't receive love. Hannah is portrayed as a woman who doesn't care for her daughter. On the other hand she is indulged in sexual pleasure with men. Sula is witnessed to "her mother in the bed, curled spoon in the arms of the man" (Morrison, 1976, p.44). Here, Morrison emphasises women's right for having sexual pleasure.

Sula and Nel's encounter with the white boys brings into light patriarchal domination in the society. At the age of twelve Sula handles the matter bravely. She cuts the tip of her figure and says "if I can do that for myself, what you suppose I' do to you?" (pp.54-55). Eventually, there is no escape for Sula from the rigid social norms and customs of the society. As women, both Sula and Nel are seen as victims of the male dominated society. So, Morrison suggests developing mutual understanding with each other which is obviously seen in each of her novels, and *Sula* is not an exception. There is female bonding between Sula and Nel. Another unnatural relationship that destroys Sula is her intimacy with her lover Ajax. He was attracted towards her only because of all the stories he heard about Sula. He just wants to use Sula for his sexual gratification. There is no pure love between them for each other. So their romance did not continue for long. Ajax deserts her when he finds that she has started loving him. His fear of her love and possessiveness leaves her alone. Sula's love for Ajax was also not real one. Later in the novel when she comes to know about the truth of Ajax's behavior she says, "It's just as well he left. Soon I would have torn the flesh from his face just to see if I was right about the gold and nobody would have understood that kind of curiosity" (p.136). Their relationship was not genuine. She just wanted to enjoy the company of males. It is the result of her parental background as well where she got nothing but maleness. Being a fatherless child, she had experienced her mother Hannah as well as her grandmother Eva's sufferings. She wanted to take a strong stand against male hegemony which looks down upon the females. As Syed Mujahid asserts,

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. (Mujahid, 2014, p. 94)

Being deprived of love and care at home Sula turns to her friend Nel. She seeks affection and guidance in her friend but her attempt is seen futile. Opposite to Sula, Nel is seen apparently good, God-fearing and trustworthy. Nel is a woman who follows the social conducts and codes set by the black community. She loves her husband Jude and cannot even imagine sex without him. On the contrary, Sula has immoral relationship with all the married men in Medallion. She lives alone and does not want to settle her life with a single man. She needs neither a husband nor children. These traits seem bizarre to the people in the community. 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” (Morrison, 1976, p.112).

Sula is considered evil and is not accepted by the black community. The Blacks of the bottom have particular ideology about womanhood and they do not approve Sula's individualistic approach. She behaves in an unfamiliar manner not accepted by the norms of the society. She is a threat to black community, one who can destroy the social order. She is also called a devil because of the manner in which she reacts to her mother's burning. There is a distinct birthmark over her one eye. This mark signifies different meaning to different people. For the women of the community, it is a snake. This mark of the devil on her face is a direct evidence of her evil nature. She is a rebel and tries to live away from the values of the society she is born into. She feels suffocated in the narrow, traditional and rigid order of the society. Her affairs with different men show her ardent desire to define herself against the falsehood of age old norms which kill female existence. 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” (2014, p. 41).

## **Shobha De's *Starry Nights***

Shobha De, a significant female writer from Indian writing in English is a feminist who defends for women rights. She realistically tries to find out the cause of pains and sufferings of women in Indian society. Her women are completely different from the women who do not follow the codes and conducts of society. She emphasizes the changing images of women and the possibilities available for them to live a life of independence. Her women do not believe in the narrow confines of marriage and motherhood. They feel suffocated under the pressure of marriage where their freedom is at stake. She reveals the pathetic reality in the lives of modern urban women where they are subjugated on account of their gender. Therefore, they seek freedom in the form of sexual involvement outside marriage. For Shobha De's women, extra-marital relationship is not immoral. De has portrayed women who perform sex outside marriage. She ridicules the hypocrisy of Indian society which allows men who want sexual freedom. On the contrary women are strictly advised to fulfill their sexual urge from their husbands. De's women break the social taboo which believes that a married woman must enjoy sexual pleasure only inside marriage. As Deepanjali Mishra asserts,

Shobha De as a writer tries to mirror or portray her feminist mindset while portraying women in her novels. A broader evaluation of her work reveals her protest against the old image of women who can't live the way she wants to and do things the way she wants to. Women in her novels are represented as sexually liberated and free thinkers who have been termed as 'New Woman'. (Mishra, 2012, p. 15)

According to Shobha De, a woman in Indian society is considered as a commodity to her husband after her marriage. She has very well unfolded the miseries and sufferings of women on account of gender in *Starry Nights* (1991). Women like Asha Rani, Geetha Devi, Malini, and Rita are humiliated, and they are victims of male domination. Asharani's mother Geetha Devi struggled hard while rearing her daughters due to poverty. She even had to work as a prostitute to run the family and fulfill the basic needs. Her hardship is very visible when

she recalls looking at her album, "How appa had lost interest in her. How Girija had humiliated her and called her as a common prostitute. How appa had abruptly cut off all money leaving Amma with no choice but to sell all her jewellery...moving out of their luxurious bungalow and into some ugly place in an overcrowded filthy area" (De, 1991, p.117). Geetha Rani, suffered and humiliated at the hands of her husband, does not care about her daughter Asharani. She is responsible for Asharani's downfall as a prey to men's lust in Indian Bollywood. Her mother pushed her into the industry of pornographic movies in order to bag money, name, and fame. "It is the saga of a young girl, when circumstances compel her, who has confronted with the every sort of situation in order to become a successful star in the Bollywood" (Premalatha & Deviasigamani, 2015, p.229).

De wants to highlight how a woman is responsible for the misfortunes of another woman. Later, Asharani is humiliated and exploited by Sheth Amirchand who exploits her physically. She becomes a victim to an abnormal sex where Amirchand orders a diaphragm to be inserted into her body and even hits her with a thin rod. She suffered a lot on account of her relationship with Akshay Arora who simply used her as a sex toy. Though he is already married with Malini, he does not bother to enjoy sex with Asharani. Being a typical representative of Indian patriarchy Malini becomes a rival to her and she curses her for her illicit affair with her husband. Akshay too shouts at her when she arrives in one ceremony as an uninvited guest – "Why have you come here? ... Bitch! Don't you know your place? I don't like my women spying, you are a spy! Wanted to catch me with someone, didn't you? Get out, get out!" (De, 1991, p. 93). Shobha De primarily exposes gender discrimination, and inferior status of women and double standards in Indian society. On one hand Akshay Arora expects obedience and faithfulness from his wife Malini and on the other hand he himself betrays both his wife and Asharani. He is involved in several extra-marital affairs:

Everyone in the industry knew, however, that on the night before the wedding itself... Akshay, sloshed senseless, had driven straight to the house of Silk Simki and stayed there. Even before their honeymoon was over Akshay had betrayed



her trust at least half-a-dozen times. He was an indiscriminating womanizer. And a champion hypocrite. (De, 1991, pp. 67-68)

Both Asharani and Malini are victims of male dominated Indian society. Malini, being a wife, does not want to take any stand against her husband. This typical mentality of Indian women is very well reflected by De. Women do not raise their voice against their husband. They are afraid to lose them. The same case is with Asharani. Marriage becomes an obsession for her and she flirts with Akshay. When she understands that it is of no use to pursue him, she turns her eyes upon another man Abhijeet Mehra who too betrays her. He uses her to satisfy his lust. Another female character of importance is Rita, the wife of one rich man Kailash. Through her again, De highlights the futility behind Indian marriages. Rita herself tells Asharani about the shabby and unreal marital relationship in the following words:

‘Look at this way, Sweetie’, Rita crooned. ‘You have his name. You live well. He is good to you – I mean, there is no violence in your marriage. Akshayji doesn’t beat you or anything. Of course, at this point you hate Akshayji. That is normal. In any case, most women hate their husbands – it is a fact. They hate marriage. That is also a fact. But what else can they do? What is the choice?’ (De, 1991, p. 84)

The notion of sexual freedom for women is very well reflected in her controversial novel *Starry Nights*. Shobha De shatters the patriarchal hegemony where man is at the central position at home as well as in the society. He is a decision maker and a woman is there to follow all his commands without asking any question. An independent man enjoys all the comforts in marital life. Even his extra marital affairs are silently accepted by a patriarchal society. In such a situation no one thinks about the woman who is lonely in her home waiting for her husband. A woman without a man is always considered as an incomplete being. The patriarchal pressure does not allow her to step out from home and see life in her own perspectives. She is compelled to see and experience life as per the requirements of the family, particularly her husband. Shobha De rigorously attacks this evil patriarchal system of Indian society that kills women’s existence. She directly emphasizes the idea of sexual

freedom which is very natural. Marriage as a social institute has brought limitations upon women. She has to perform the role of an obedient wife and a careful mother within the confines of marriage. However, women in Shobha De's novels seek freedom from the bondage of marriage and motherhood. In marital relationship a woman has to fulfill the sexual need of her husband; at the same time it is taught that she needs not to show her sexual appetite. It is secondary whether she is sexually gratified in marital relationship of her husband or not. It is considered that she has to adjust with the situation whatever it may be. However, Shobha De exposes this narrow mindedness of Indian society. She tries to portray another side of Indian women dissatisfied in her marital relationship. She simply wants to highlight that if men can seek sexual pleasure outside marriage then women can also do the same. According to her, women too like men want sexual pleasure. If they do not get it in marital relationship they have the right to seek it outside and there is nothing wrong in that.

If a woman seeks sexual pleasure outside marriage then it is considered to be social taboos. However, De rebels against this gender politics where men are given freedom to seek sexual pleasure but women are denied the same. She has given a very frank treatment to sex in her *Starry Nights*. She has spoken about sex in the following way in another novel, *Snapshots* (1995), "Sex is no longer the most dreaded and despised three letter word in India, is enough to celebrate" (De, 1995, p. 3). As Narender Kumar Neb writes, "De's treatment of female sexuality gives the impression that she propagates free sex and macho female behavior as a means of women's emancipation. But the reality is different and De's real concerns are rather otherwise. Her prime concern is to expose the futility and meaningless of such kind of pseudo feminist behavior" (Neb, 2006, p. 163).

De has shown the possibility for women to get away from the continuous humiliation at home. Her women indulge in outside sex, manipulate males. However, the attempt is not successful because they are not able to win over the situation. As P. R. Jain observes, "Shobha De successfully depicts the tension arising out of the failure of the Indian women in dealing with the situations emerging from a clash between conservatism and liberalism. She also highlights in her novels

certain issues such as the non-acceptance of the liberated woman by the Indian society, women's freedom in the contemporary India and an individual dilemma” (Jain, 2014, p.2). In *Starry Nights*, Aasha Rani is dissatisfied with Akshay Kumar because he exploits her. He is the only man whom she loves but he does not treat her better than a kept woman since he is married. Thus she challenges, “All of you are just the same, but wait, I will show you. I will do to men what they try to do to me. I will screw you all-beat you at your own game!” (De, 1991, p. 8). Aasha Rani’s relations with women, be it Thai girls or the Showbiz reporter Linda is challenging to the patriarchal society. She feels ecstasy in the company of her female friends. As the narrator writes, “it was weeks before she could forget the feel of two, smooth, soft, oiled, practically breast less bodies on either side of her, touching, licking, stroking every naked inch, making her skin tingle and come alive in a way she couldn’t have imagined possible (De, 1991, p. 66). She experiences “the greatest orgasm of her life” (p. 66). Her lesbian affair with Linda is an unforgettable experience for her. She says, “It could never be with a man” (p. 82). She had several sexual experiences with men but all the time she hated those males. She never enjoyed those experiences. She did not feel guilty. Her complete satisfaction with a female companion is the emergence of a ‘new woman’ who is able to have pleasure without a man – a woman who does not need man any further. As Richa comments,

In *Starry Nights*, the lesbian relationship between Linda and Aasha Rani is a revolt against the patriarchal traditional set up of our society, which allows the sexual relationship of only the heterosexual kind. In man-woman relationship, it is usually the man who has an upper hand. Most women have no guts to voice or reacts to their partner’s feeling of fulfillment in sexual pleasure. But through lesbianism woman gives a vibrant jolt and denounces man as unimportant even on the sexual front. (Richa, 2013, p.6)

On account of her failure in the relationship with Akshay, Asharani goes to England. There she meets Jamie (Phillips) whom she marries. She becomes a mother of one daughter, Sasha. Leaving her past life as a Bollywood star she starts living as a wife and mother. However, her

marriage is unsuccessful as her husband does not understand her feelings. Being frustrated she returns to India to find her roots. Later, she is completely broken when she comes to know that her husband has affair with one girl called Alice. It indicates women's universal dilemma of humiliation and suffering on account of male domination where she is treated as a secondary thing. Asharani's hope to find peace and happiness in marriage is possible neither in India nor in England. However, her attempt to find peace and happiness in her relationship with other women like Linda is noteworthy. Her lesbian relationship with Linda is her bold attempt to revolt against male chauvinism. De's Asha Rani is a new woman who represents the coming women generation of India. She furls the orthodox Indian tradition which limits women's existence under the name of culture. The women in the respective novel are self-motivated and confident. They strongly believe in their potential and they do not need anybody's support to survive in the society. De's Asharani takes the tool of lesbian relationship to stand against the oppressive and hypocritical Indian marriage institution. She advocates for women's rights and redefines the gender roles in *Starry Nights*. She shows how the educated women also become victims of age old norms today and they struggle hard to live as a human being. She strengthens the female voice and instead of showing them as sufferers under the burden of patriarchy she shows women as decision makers of their own lives.

## Conclusion

Morrison and De have done a similar attempt to expose the gender politics in male dominated society. They have revealed the ugly reality of gender discrimination in respective societies. Morrison's *Sula*, Hannah, Eva, and Nel are victims of age old patriarchy. They all are treated badly by males. Though Nel follows all codes and conducts, she is humiliated, exploited and betrayed by her husband Jude. *Sula* does not follow the gender codes; her idea of freedom is considered evil in the community; and she is labeled a 'pariah'. Similarly, De's Asharani, Geetha Devi, and Malini are humiliated on the account of gender. Either married or unmarried, women have the same fate of suffering and humiliation. The cycle of oppression is never ending. Both the writers safeguard women's rights and give voice to the voiceless women in

their respective novels. Their works stand for the third wave feminism where women fight against gender politics and struggle for individual identity. Their novels expose vulnerable condition of women on account of gender. At the same time it brings women's significant attempt to liberate themselves from the evil bondages of social conventions to the limelight.

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