

Research Article

**EXPLORATION OF FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS IN TONI MORRISON'S SULA  
AND CHIMAMANDA ADICHIE'S PURPLE HIBISCUS**

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**ABSTRACT**

Feminism simply is defined as the belief in equality for all the people regardless of their gender. It mainly focuses on women's issues like gender based violence, sexism, racism and so on. Toni Morrison and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, the most eminent African American writers reveal not only about the sufferings and indignity of black women but also the possibility of women to resist the repression. In their novels, they show the originating consciousness among the black women for their own survival. This paper is an attempt to study how both these writers depict female consciousness and also how those women characters become independent and lived a life of their own.

**Keywords:** Feminist Consciousness, Oppression, Racism, Classism, Feminism

**INTRODUCTION**

Toni Morrison's *Sula* is a story of motherhood, friendship and love. The novel mainly deals with the black community especially the black women, who live in a patriarchal society where they are discriminated on the basis of race, sex and class. As blacks, they are denied of their rights and have to lead a secluded life. Feminism and Women's Movement give great influence on women to raise themselves and to have equality with men. This Women's Movement has also inspired the Afro-American women to struggle against the racial issues that are not faced by the white community. Sula Peace is the main character in the novel *Sula*, who breaks all the traditional values in the society and has become an independent woman. As a black woman, she rejects all the social norms in the Bottom society by ignoring marriage and choosing a sexual partner. However, the people in the Bottom society criticized her for all her misdeeds. They blame her for whatever that happens in the society. She is thus named as a pariah and evil. The novel 'Purple Hibiscus' published in 2003 is the debut novel of the famous Nigerian woman writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. She has won many awards: Women's Prize for Fiction, MacArthur Fellowship, Pen Open Book Award and Anisfield Wolf Book Award for Fiction. Adichie encourages the women to dream a world which has men and ladies who are happier and faithful themselves. In her book 'We Should All Be Feminists', she depicts her experiences of facing gender-based discrimination.

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### **FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS PORTRAYED IN ‘SULA’ AND ‘PURPLE HIBISCUS’**

Feminism extended into the theoretical or philosophical field is known as a Feminist Theory. It aims to promote the women’s rights and interests. It has spread over a wide range of areas within the Western society. In the ancient times, most of the societies were patriarchal. The minorities were expected to be the slaves. Women in the society had to face several hardships throughout. No one questions for whatever that happens to them. So the life of women were considered miserable. However, the Feminist Movement evoked new ideas and thoughts in the mind of women. They started to protest against the atrocities that they faced. Women began to acquire knowledge and question the society. Toni Morrison, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and all other women writers wanted to uplift the women and establish equality within the society. So they expressed their ideas through various characters in the novel. In their novel, they portray women characters to be strong and powerful.

To understand Sula’s social life, we need to study the background of her family, friendship and society. In terms of family, Sula lives in a turbulent family. She has witnessed several incidents in her childhood which is unusual to be seen by a girl. She is raised in a family where women enjoyed complete freedom that is denied for the black community. Sula spends her childhood under the care of her mother, Hannah Peace. She does not have the right figure of her father. Both father and mother are the essential figures to build up a family. But in the case of Sula, she is only able to see her mother who is under the supervision of Eva Peace, Hannah’s mother. After being separated from her husband, she exploits the pleasure of sex by sleeping with the husbands of her friends. She does not care for the feelings of other women. As a result, she has never succeeded in building up a good family. Sula also becomes hurt when she overhears that her mother does not love her. She has seen her grandmother who takes good care of her family even after abandoned by her husband, Boy Boy. She also plays the role of men by taking care of Tar Baby, The Deweys and her own son, Plum. Even at the time when Plum gets set on fire, no one except Hannah has the courage to question her. When she questions her, Eva asked “Is? My baby? Burning?” (Toni Morrison, *Sula* 48). But when she learns that Eva wanted her child to die as a man, she simply shuts her mouth. Eva believes that “I had room enough in my heart but not in my womb, not to more I birthed him once. I couldn’t do it again. He was growed, a big old thing. Godhavemercy, I couldn’t birth him twice” (71). Eva also bravely cuts off her leg in order to get money to raise her children.

In the case of friendship, Nel is Sula’s best friend. Sula’s acceptance of Nel has made a strong bond between them. Nel is impressed by Eva Peace, who is one-legged. This is because she comes from a conventional family where she sees women live according to the tradition. As in the case of Sula, she is impressed by Helene, Nel’s grandmother, who is able to manage and control everything in her house, including giving love to her own daughter. After the marriage, Nel breaks out from her mother’s constrained tradition and is moved to a less conventional household. But in the case of Sula, she experiences a sense of order and control that is never given in Sula’s family. The death of Chicken Little also signifies the strongest moments of their bonding. They believe that a best friend is one who shares not only joyful moments but also hard times with each other.

Finally, Sula rebels against the conventional values of the society. This shows her arising feminist spirit. The Bottom is the place where the blacks lived and the women there are only expected to look after their household works. She fights against the patriarchal and racial issues that ends up in rejecting marriage and sleeping with other men. Marriage according to her is never good, as women are meant to remain obedient. She finally comes up with the decision not to get married and apply free sex to please her biological needs. Sula has chosen her mother’s path. She

shows her extreme rebellion by sending messages to all the women in bottom; that marriage is not necessary. She has the complete freedom to choose her partner. Sula decides not to get settled with one man and also she conveys equality in terms of racial aspects, so she sleeps with a white man. She hopes that women could do more things without seeking the help of men. For her, the whites and blacks are equal. According to Sula, men are not worthier than women. "They ain't worth more than me. And besides, I never loved no man because he was worth it. Worth didn't have nothing to do with it. But my mind did. That's all" (143-144). Even though she is put up in a black community, she acquires education from abroad. She thus violated the rule that women should not be educated. But her education has not made her an ideal human being. She is not able to understand the good and bad. All her misdeeds caused hatred in the minds of the people. She is then named as pariah, the name given to a disaster bringer. But she never cares for them.

Sula wants to live her life and wants to live herself. The tedium and melancholy of modern life in the cities point up her alienation in urban cities. Thus she realizes the dreadful consequences of alienation in urban cities. She later realizes that silence is not eternal but the death of time and a loneliness so profound, the word itself had no meaning. After love making, she wants her partner to turn away and leave her. Such isolation of Sula culminates in her confession to Nel while dying. Her life may not be a tale of success. Thus she leads an independent life that pursues her own course of freedom. In doing so, she is destroyed but at the same time achieves a rare individuality which no others in Bottom has gained.

Adichie in her novel *Purple Hibiscus* portrays two different kinds of feminism: African Feminism and Radical Feminism. African Feminism portrays the pathetic condition of women prevail within Africa. In novels, the writers depict the tolerant forgiving women who could also be an individual and also a product for happiness. They are not independent and not allowed to be happy. They are in pursuit of their own identity. African women tolerate the brutality and victimization from the lads. They are always in an obedient way, a kind of an ideal woman for the sake of her society. In African tradition, divorce is taken under consideration as illegal. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Beatrice Achike represents the African woman. She is the central character, Kambili's mother, who is quiet, religious and submissive. She takes care of her children. Throughout the novel, Mama tolerates the brutality of her husband. Radical Feminism may be a response against the violence. Women use violence as a weapon to realize their freedom. Mama breaks her silence and acts against him. With the ending of the novel, we will know that her real recognition is identified without extinguishing the flame of hope. Her goodness and endurances all show because of violence which is an ultimate weapon and eventually shines as a kind of beacon to her freedom. Mama confesses:

"I started putting poison into his tea before I came to Nsukka. Sisi got it for me; her uncle is a powerful doctor". (Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* 290)

While stepping into detail, we will see two kinds of women within the novel; Good women and Real women. There are two major female characters in this novel Mama (good woman) and Auntie Ifeoma (real women). Mama lives a life totally dedicated to her family according to the patriarchal values and models herself as a stereotype woman. She looks after her family and never reciprocates against the male violence towards herself or her own children. Auntie Ifeoma, a quite independent woman advises Mama to act against the violence. However, Mama refuses it mainly due to her adherence to the social dictates of the African society. Hence, she feels she does not oppose her husband though he does whatever bad towards her. Auntie Ifeoma could also be a sensible and bold woman who skills to need the alternatives and control her life. She is the one

who pushes Jaja to open his new ideas and encourages him to be bold and act against his father's oppressive rule. Auntie Ifeoma says that:

“Being defiant can be a good thing sometimes” (144).

Auntie Ifeoma plays an important role in Kambili's life. She teaches her to smile. Kambili lacks Smile and Joy within the start of the novel. Through Auntie Ifeoma, she understands the essence of smile. Auntie Ifeoma says that:

“He was smiling.... He was smiling” (186).

Domestic Violence is one of the predominant themes in a feministic novel. Violence results in physical deformity and psychological scars. Without exception, women are more susceptible to violence. Women are always considered to be weak, vulnerable and through an edge to be exploited. They face great insecurity in home where they need to be safe: within their family. For several of them, home is one of the places they face violence at the hands of somebody close or trust to them. Within the novel Eugene Achike, husband of Mama is portrayed as a model citizen and a husband who becomes horribly abusive in his home. He tortures his wife, children and sister physically and psychologically. Mama Beatrice silently accepts violence because she could be a logo of biddable women. She is also the mother of two children Kambili and Jaja. She takes care of her children but doesn't speak out against Papa's violence. Adichie recounts Mama as an acquiescent woman who obeys her husband with no objections within the foremost parts of the novel. Throughout the novel, Mama is cruelly beaten by Papa for not willing to travel to the priest. “There is blood on the floor”, Jaja said. “I'll get the brush from the bathroom” (33).

She faces miscarriages due to her husband's brutal beatings. Beatrice tells her children that “There was an accident, the baby is gone” (34).

Not only in Mama's characters, other characters also face a regime of terror and violence from Papa. The novel begins with Jaja who is not interested to attend the communion within the church. This exasperates Papa Eugene who could also be a strict authoritarian. He has rigid rules with in his circle of relatives. When he tries to abuse Jaja, Mama remains silent. She never tries to support Jaja.

“Things started to fall apart at home when my brother, Jaja did not go to communion and papa flung his heavy missal across the room and broke the figurines on the etagere” (3).

Kambili lives under the strict Catholic rule of her father. She fears his violent punishments. Her Papa's love creates pain and damage in her life. Everything in her life is set by Papa, and she remains silent due to the fear of his reactions. She points out that “You could say anything at any time to anyone” (120).

In both these novels, we can see women are exposed in many ways. Born as a woman, the society sees them to be someone, who are supposed to work for men and live according to the rules made by the society. Anyone, who violates this, is regarded to be have committed a sin. However, Sula and Beatrice Achike never wished to hide themselves within the rules. They believed that there is a world outside the dominion. So, in order to reach there, they have to break that bond. What they wanted to do is to prove that; women too are also equal like that of men. They are not the ones who are meant only to suffer, or the ones to be suppressed. Toni Morrison is very much sensitive to feminist concerns. She includes the feminine elements of a black women in her novel *Sula*. In the novel *Sula*, the central figure Sula, is an adventurous women. She is not ruthless but rather spontaneous. She takes little from others and gives less. She sees things only from her part and did everything for her pleasure without caring for others. In *Purple Hibiscus*,

Beatrice Achike, even though was a disciplined women later has changed completely. Her hidden feminist spirit arises finally, when her husband ill treats her. Thus she gets the courage to poison him. In the case of both women, the environment which they are subjected to have, influenced them a lot. If Sula has received the caring of both her father and mother, she might have become an ideal woman. On the other hand, if Beatrice has received her status and support from her husband, she might not have poisoned him. Here the circumstance is what that changed them.

### CONCLUSION

The frustration that Sula faced from the family, friendship and society made her to develop a feminist spirit in her. Even though Sula is Hannah's daughter, she mistreats her and rejects her existence. Next is Nel, who believes Sula to be her soul mate. They have shared many valuable moments in the past. But after the marriage, Nel started to share her affection only with her husband. The society too ignored her. They looked her differently and called her pariah and evil. She is considered as a sinner, so people believed that her existence would cause disasters to the black community. However, Sula has her own reasons to oppose the patriarchal society. She never wanted the women to be completely vanquished by the men. She has also seen that the whites are so powerful that they have the power to make the blacks suffer. All these tortures that she has faced, made her to violate the rules. For Beatrice Achike, she has never heard a good word from her husband. But he punishes her at times. Even their children have to undergo frustration. He is a religious man and always move according to the rules. He never allowed anyone in his family to violate it. Finally for the sake of herself and for her children, she poisoned him and gives him a peaceful death. Their desires were to free themselves from all the bonds. Even though these characters never received any support from the society, they kept their vision and their energies focused upon what is beneficial and right. Thus they succeeded in establishing their power.

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