

Citation: Anjum, M., Khan, R. R., & Khan, Y. (2021). Eccentricity and Conformity in Toni Morrison's *A Sula: The Struggle for Life in a Patriarchal Society*. *Global Language Review*, VI(I), 233-240. [https://doi.org/10.31703/glr.2021\(VI-I\).25](https://doi.org/10.31703/glr.2021(VI-I).25)



Eccentricity and Conformity in Toni Morrison's *A Sula: The Struggle for Life in a Patriarchal Society*

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Abstract

The present research investigates the struggle of female entities throughout their lives in a male-dominated society, either acting in congruity or incongruity with the norms and set patterns of the society in order to get societal acceptance or to assert their sovereign individual-selves. The American society that is full of discrimination victimizes the race of Blacks in general and Black women in particular. As a result, the oppressed and subjugated woman has suffered as the 'Other' in American society during and after the era of slavery. The present research has delineated the existential conflicts of the Black female and the submissive or assertive behaviors they adopt to survive as free individuals. It is a qualitative research of Toni Morrison's novel that has been critically analyzed. The novel, A Sula has been analyzed by using the lens of the Feminist Conceptual Framework, and feminine existential issues have been discussed under the umbrella of Feminist Existentialism. The present study is expected to be a significant one because it highlights different situations of the individuals in which they can redirect their destiny by actively participating as 'subjects' or passively submitting as 'Objects'.

Key Words: Feminism, Feminist Existentialism, The Struggle for Females, Black Women

Introduction

To be a female in this world is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below. (Morrison, 2008)

The struggle of human beings to spend desired and prestigious life has been proclaimed in history and literature. Human beings and their existential being has been ascribed by a lot of famous writers and delineated by everyone in his/her own specific way. They all have described human existence and human condition according to their own respective philosophy and ideology. Rationalist philosophical conventions have no accord on the most proficient method to comprehend human instinct or the meaning and motivation behind life, other than for

every person to produce his or her own feeling of self-understanding, meaning and reason. Physical qualities of being human: having a body, sex and sexuality, exotic nature, and the ability to identify or assimilate with the environment or society in terms of delight and misery; these are all attributes that matter to thinkers and philosophers who look to comprehend humanity and human nature.

The living world forces put constraints on the experience of being human: suffering, maturing, misfortune, appetite, ailments and death are the same amount of part of the human existence as bliss, joy, adoration, satisfaction, and prosperity are. Part of being human is, figuring out how to acknowledge

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such impediments, regardless of the possibility that it is additionally some portion of human instinct to fight or struggle against them. The self is integral to human discernment. It includes numerous levels of representation with the psychosocial levels of capacity of articulating the self with the group. A working meaning of the self includes all genuine, fanciful, and typical fundamental qualities and identity traits that make a man distinguishable from others.

Self-awareness might be characterized by the progressing cognizance of being the operator and the proprietor of one's own contemplations and activities and of having a self that is always worried about one's own particular discernment and judgment and that of others. It is associated with inter-subjectivity that can be characterized as the interchangeable among various kinds of self-awareness acting in terms of interpersonal relationships, as designed by human social orders.

Many thinkers would keep up that people are, both separately and on the whole, allowed to design their own course, to decide their own particular reason. Without a pre-given, "powerful" method for comprehension of the significance of life, humans are allowed to make their own meaning or sense of reason. Although such freedom or opportunity can be mishandled (for a few, the motivation behind life can mean minimal more than narrow-minded joy looking for, even to the detriment of others), most people would contend that one's own opportunity of freedom to choose to mean is more essential than endeavors to judge or assess the importance and meaning or choices of others.

Society builds up parameters of rights and obligations inside which one's motivation and purpose might be forged, and these offer different clues to differentiate between lives that are beneficial, effective and cheerful. As [Berguno \(2008\)](#) expressed his views that:

"Death, suffering, struggle and guilt, these existential situations represent a limit to our power and knowledge. Yet paradoxically, they also represent an opportunity for existential self-becoming; they are the foundations of our freedom."
([Berguno, 2008](#))

All these elements are available to help every individual design his/her sense of reason and meaning. The meaning of life can be further comprehended by considering the self and self-awareness as parts of a transformative procedure that identifies with the development of unique types of interpersonal relationships just known in human social orders. Through development, the struggle for the self among people has logically put on a weight that is equivalent to, or more prominent than, the quick struggle for survival, consideration, affection, and acknowledgement. The self and awareness are emphatically decided formative through all phases of life by social and family associations. They assume a basic role in the way people adapt to self-representation and affect each other through their projector examples.

One can say that the reason for being human is to carry on a free and self-coordinated life in the quest for joy. It is on the continuum between discovering satisfaction and happiness with the way things are and endeavoring to improve things. Many existentialists are of the view that we are not born anything but instead, all that we are is the result of our very own decisions, and we assemble ourselves out of our own situations, resources that society gives us. So, we don't just make our own particular values and standards; we make ourselves. De Beauvoir has placed points of confinement to the existentialist concern about self-creation and self-definition while qualifying the freedom and free-self that Sartre set in his magnum opus "Being and Nothingness"(1983), which was among the most compelling books of the twentieth century. By differentiation, De Beauvoir shows a questionable picture of human freedom in her philosophy in which women struggle against the obvious disadvantages of the female body.

This study aims to find out that how people struggle throughout their lives in a society full of discrimination. It also seeks to explicate that how females, either acting in conformity or eccentricity with their traditional and societal norms, are heading towards struggling lives and miserable plights.

Review of Literature

This study mainly deals with the struggle for life of the Afro-American people in general and of women

in particular, their eccentric and conformable behavior for their sustenance in a discriminatory American society. So, this study entails feminism, existentialist feminism, a struggle for identity, Afro-American literature and plight of misery stricken black people, eccentricity, conformity and Toni Morrison's works.

Eccentricity

Eccentricity is a kind of behavior that is strange, unconventional and unusual from the acceptable norms and set patterns of a particular society, and people who behave in an eccentric manner are called "eccentrics". Edith [Sitwell \(1933\)](#), in her famous work "English Eccentrics (1933)", delineates biographies and different events of unusual and strange individuals. She interprets eccentricity as "an exaggeration of the attitudes common to Life." ([Sitwell, 1933](#))

The medieval Latin word "eccentricus" has been derived from the Greek word "ekkentros", which means "out of the center". Eccentric was used for the first time in English literature in 1551 to demonstrate an astronomical term that refers to "a circle in which the earth, sun, etc., deviates from its center." Later in 1685, the word eccentric was used to describe strange or unconventional behavior. [Plessner \(1981\)](#) describes the meaning of eccentricity as "out of the centre" ([Plessner, \(1981\)](#)). Plessner is of a view that human beings are a sensible creature that holds a central position in nature and in itself, so he assigns human beings existence with a specific position to which he named as "eccentric positionality". ([Plessner, 1981](#))

Domain of Eccentricity

The domain of eccentricity in daily life and in literature is our behavior towards life itself, towards social values and living in accordance with cultural norms. Plessner delineates that:

"Human particular position is threefold: it is the body, in the body (the inner life, the soul) and at the same time out of the body, as a viewpoint from which it is both" (Plessner, 1981).

Human beings contain a body, experience different events and things with the help of this body

and are capable of stepping back to observe themselves as having a body and getting experience through it. According to Plessner, this situation results in the formation of three different modes of human existence "*Außenwelt, Innenwelt and Mitwelt*". *Außenwelt* is "the outside world", that is the world of material things surrounding us". *Innenwelt* is the inner world that is the soul, and with the help of this soul, human beings experience their own body. *Mitwelt* is the third mode of human beings' existence in which human beings interact with their body and outer world that result in the formation of her character. So it can be said that eccentricity is related to the ways of living, behaving and valuing.

[Nagel \(1986\)](#), an American philosopher, in his famous work "The View from Nowhere (1986)" describes two viewpoints: the subjective and the objective viewpoints that direct human beings in forming a specific attitude towards life. In the subjective viewpoint, "I: is the center of every attitude that aims only one's personal good and an objective viewpoint, other members of society are considered equally important entities that help in valuing the welfare of society, so the resultant behaviors of these two idiosyncratic viewpoints are quite different. After examining the thoughts of both Plessner and Nagel, it can be delineated that human being form her attitude toward life with the interplay of subjective and objective viewpoints that can result in benefit for individuals and society as well.

Eccentric Text

Among different types of text genres, one is the genre of eccentric text. These texts are reference points of themselves. These eccentric texts are: "standing in the same kind of relation to others – readers and other texts – as eccentrics do to the outside world." ([Hildt, 2009](#)) The main features of eccentric texts are: their main point of reference is themselves, and they also avoid adopting writing-style, values and topics of their particular era. They pay no heed to the reader and his thoughts and fail to fulfil the basic needs of communication.

These are the preliminary characteristics of eccentric texts that enable them to categorize themselves as a separate genre of literature.

Conformity

Conformity is a type of behavior in accordance with socially accepted norms and conventions. *Conformity* is also defined as “yielding to group pressures”. (Crutchfield, 1955). Word conformity is derived from mid-14th century “conformed” and Old French “conformer” that means agree to, be similar and from Latin word “conformance” that means to modify, form, educate”.

The term conformity is often used to indicate an agreement to the majority position, brought about either by a desire to ‘fit in’ or be liked (normative) or because of a desire to be correct (informational), or simply to conform to a social role (identification). (Mcleod, 2016)

Mcleod (2016) is of the view that people conform to a certain group or society in order to come in accordance with a particular group or follow cultural or social norms to get identification with that particular culture or society.

Types of Conformity

In his viewpoint, Kelman (1958) delineated conformity in three different types. One is compliance, second is internalization, and the third is identification.

Compliance

This is a state of conformity in which an individual accepts influence as he wants to get a favorable reaction from someone else or society. Kelman (1958) argues about conforming behavior of an individual as “He adopts the induced behavior because he expects to gain specific rewards or approval and avoid specific punishment or disapproval by conformity”. (Kelman, 1958)

Internalization

Internalization is a state in which an individual being accepts the influence of the induced behavior because its content is rewarding intrinsically. A factor of this

form of conformity is that “He adopts the induced behavior because it is congruent [consistent] with his value system”. (Kelman, 1958)

Identification

This type of conformity appears on the individual level, “when an individual accepts influence because he wants to establish or maintain a satisfying self-defining relationship to another person or group.” (Kelman, 1958)

Non-Conformity

In every society and culture, people behave conformingly to bring harmony in a community, but there are some individuals in every society who do not conform to some specific social pressure; rather, they behave in a non-conforming way following their craving to sustain themselves as an independent being from the norms of the society and culture in which they are living.

Cultural Differences in Conformity

Different cultures have established their idiosyncratic norms and traditions, so these cultural values differ in many ways. Smith and Bond (1993), in their work “*Social Psychology across Cultures: Analysis and Perspectives* (1993)”, found cultural differences in conformity between western and eastern countries. People living in western cultures are more willing to live a life free from the restrictions and prone to be self-sufficient and individualistic, and act in non-conformity. In eastern cultures, individuals are more prone towards acting in conformity, valuing their cultural, social and familial norms and living for others’ needs, so they are more conformist in their behaviors.

Feminism

Feminist theory, named feminism has been created as a part of a feminist movement endeavoring to challenge customs, priorities and strategies in all parts of life. The feminist movement “began a widespread call for a major reassessment of concepts, theories, and methods employed within and across the academic disciplines (Hesse-Biber, 2007). Feminism offers a plate form for comprehending human behavior within the social milieu by focusing

upon the woman and their issues in contemporary society.

Feminist theory reflects “a world view that values women, and that confronts systematic injustices based on gender.” (Chinn & Wheeler, 1985) Feminism emphasizes seeing individuals, families, groups and organizations in the social, cultural, ethnic, economic and political contexts. These contexts emerge as supportive elements for oppression and subjugation that is directly connected to gendered relationships.

Existentialist Feminism and its Relation to Female Entities

Existentialism oozes out as a result of the different philosophical thoughts about a human being's existence and his inner and preliminary experience of man's consciousness and self-awareness. It is very difficult to define existentialism but different philosophical canons while putting "Emphasis on human existence is the beginning of the definition of existentialism" (Beck, 1969).

Existentialism is a theory that is a philosophical movement that deals with the existence, freedom and choice of an individual. It is of the view that philosophy should comprise of the experiences of the individual and his/her separate existence. It believes in the entire freedom of the individual, and resultant responsibility for his actions through this responsibility raises feelings of anguish, angst and dread. It fundamentally emphasizes the individual's freedom of choice, action and decision and exhibits that the best way to transcend the basically absurd state of human beings (which is described by struggle or suffering and death as inescapable demise) is by practicing our own freedom and decision.

Existentialism emerged in the nineteenth century on the literary cosmos by the philosophical thoughts of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, although both of them have never used the particular term. Other literary canons of existentialism are Heidegger, Jaspers, Husserl, Dostoevsky and Kafka. Hegel and Schopenhauer had contributed specifically to the development of existentialism because there exist such hints that the philosophies of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche were composed accordingly or contrary to them. French existentialists (1940-1950) like Sartre,

Camus, and de Beauvoir also produced different written works and delivered lectures to promote existential topics, such as fear, the absurd, freedom, alienation, boredom, responsibility and nothingness.

Kierkegaard considered rationality to be a system that people use to counter their existential anxiety, their trepidation of being in this materialistic world. Sartre (1986) considered rationality to be a type of "bad faith" (Sartre, 1986), an endeavor by the self to force structure on a very basic level to an unreasonable and irregular universe of "the other". This state of being in bad faith ruins us from discovering meaning in freedom and limits us to day to day experience.

He also put a focus on that people must opt for their own particular manner without the guidance of social, moral and cultural values. Nietzsche explicitly entailed that the individual must choose which situations are to be considered moral ones. Along with all these apprehensions, most existentialists trust that individual experience and acting in congruity to one's own feelings and desires is the key to reality.

Heidegger has been considered an early intellectual of existentialism, in particular his compelling 1927 masterpiece "Being and Time" (1927), although he has not considered himself as an existentialist. His discourse of ontology is established in an examination of the method of existence of individual beings, and his investigation of authenticity and anxiety in current society makes him particularly an Existentialist in the typical present-day use.

Sartre is a canonical figure and one of a few to have really acknowledged being called "existentialist". His most prominent work "*Being and Nothingness*" (1986) and his other works promoted the development of existentialism. In spite of the fact that Sartre is considered as the pre-eminent existentialist and an inventive philosopher in his own right, there also exist such suppositions that some critics are a great deal less inspired by his existentialist contributions in the respective field. Some see Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908 - 1961) as a superior Existentialist philosopher, specific for the incorporation of the body as our method for being in

the universe and for his more complete analysis of discernment or ideology.

A Struggle for Life in an American Discriminatory Society in 'Sula'

In the safe harbor of each other's company, they could afford to abandon the ways of other people and concentrate on their own perceptions of things. (Morrison, 1973)

Morrison, in her second novel *Sula*, sketches a community of African American people that resides in Medallion, a fictional town. Morrison, in *Sula*, evinces her concern for African American social and slave history. She criticizes the nineteenth-century subjugation and salvation of Blacks in an unequivocal manner by giving an ironic name to a place that is called The Bottom. Morrison, utilizing chronological sequence, evinces that how the lives of her characters relate with more extensive societal changes from World War I to the integration and urban restoration of the 1960s.

The focal point of the novel, *Sula*, is not a social conflict between Blacks and Whites of Medallion; instead, it reflects the ways in which African American community includes or relegates and forces its members who have agreed or denied to accept and follow the community taboos to live on social or moral margins. There are two prominent themes in *Sula* novel which the critics tend to discuss, one major concern of the novel is that it is a critique of white feminism that opens new dimensions for the black female writers, and the second is that it is the critique of binary oppositions in terms of self and other, good and evil that directs the reader to the process of changing self of black female. One of the main underlying themes of the novel is the theme of economic disparity that has become the reason for the failure of interpersonal relationships.

In *Sula*, she enunciates coruscating points that influence the African Americans of the Bottom, including gender discrimination, disability, racial prejudice and biasness of community. Morrison splendidly exhibits strong characters to move the story forward, permitting the reader to comprehend the effect of strong women on their groups and on each other.

Furthermore, she critically propounds that women's disabilities and men eventually don't define strong women characters in novel. Every woman character in *Sula* expresses the true value of being a woman in American discriminatory society and endeavors to delineate the miserable plight of a woman who is black and also faces hatred of the collective community. Male characters in *Sula* are supporting characters who are flawed people among the main female characters. Almost every male character does not take part to move the plot of the novel forward that makes *Sula* a woman's novel, which explicitly advocates the effects of gender on the plight of the misery stricken woman who is continuously in the struggle within that unsympathetic community.

Morrison elucidates her canonical abilities and iridescent thoughts by applying different literary devices along with magical realism in *Sula*. Magical realism is demonstrated by her with the help of a variety of elements such as the ice storm, the plague of robins, a conjure woman (Ajax's mother), significance of different dreams, Eva, communicating with dead Plum, Nel's try to communicate with the spirit of *Sula* are different aspects of magical realism.

There are different factors that cause the struggle in the lives of female entities within the black community, firstly the whites nullify the equal rights of black folks who either worked as a slave during slavery to their white masters or lived as free blacks; secondly, the male members of black community negate to give equal rights to their female counterparts. As a result, the black females expound to behave like any other free being and opt for different anonymous attitudes to attain certain prestigious stature within her community.

Eccentricity in *Sula*

There are different eccentric characters, pursuits and behaviors expounded in *Sula* (1973) by a writer of versatile talent, Toni Morrison. *Sula*, the protagonist of the novel, behaves in an eccentric manner on different occasions and explicates her hatred against the societal and cultural traditional roles. She posits defiance against the stereotypes about the black female as well as to the constraints from the black

community that are proved to be the hindrances for the females to excel in their lives by challenging the communal interpretation of motherhood and female sexuality in search of her true self.

Sula revolts against oppression, subjugation and discrimination to attain her free and true self. Sula, the protagonist, behaves in a prototype manner that helps other colored women to exhibit their creativity, to get their true identity, to attain their free being, to indicate their sexual, racial, class and political equality with the males in their fellow community and the whites of American society.

Sula's eccentric behavior was promulgated by her in her stay in Medallion when she was a child. She exhibits eccentricity on different occasions in her early childhood, either with "her involvement in Chicken Little's accidental drowning" (Morrison, 1974) or she replicates her eccentric behavior by "acting up, fretting the Deweys and meddling ... newly married couple" (Morrison, 1974). Moreover her "dropping things", her "unusualness", her "craziness" (Morrison, 1974) manifests her moodiness and inconsistent behavior.

Sula is a challenging character who "resists our search for the conventional 'unified' sensibility or personality" (Grant, 1988). Spiller is of the view that: "Sula is both loved and hated by the reader, embraced and rejected simultaneously..." (Spiller, 2003). She expressed her eccentric behavior conspicuously for the first time when she and her friend Nel used to come home together after school. One day some

white Irish boys started harassing her friend Nel and started passing her to one another. Nel and Sula procured to come back from school using another route to home, which was quite longer in the distance than the earlier one. One day, Sula decided to come back from that particular and shortest way where boys stood waiting for them. On the way back home, when Nel and Sula reached near to boys, they started to gaze at Nel and tried to approach her, at that time:

Holding the knife in her right hand, she pulled the slate toward her and pressed her left forefinger down hard on its edge. Her aim was determined but inaccurate. She slashed off only the tip of her finger.
(Morrison, 1974, p.54)

Conclusion

By this study, we can come to the conclusion that Sula brought out the knife from her bag and cut her finger in an emotional, mental state to frighten the boys that if she could do this to herself, then what she could do to them. As a result of "her self-mutilation in the deterrence of Irish boys" (Morrison, 1974). Boys ran away from there after witnessing that incident, and after that day, they came and went to school from that route without any fear of being harassed. This eccentric behavior is the best example of her eccentric nature. Under the topic of conclusion, the researcher gives the resultant analysis of the given study that has proved that Blacks are struggling hard in their lives in American society to lead the desired life.

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