



## **Oppression of Proletariats: A Marxist Study of Toni Morrison's *Sula & Alice Walker's The Color Purple***

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### **Abstract**

This research paper explores the Marxist views on Toni Morrison's *Sula* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. Both novels explore themes of race, gender, and class, and highlight the ways in which the ruling class oppresses and exploits the proletariat or working class. This paper argues that both Morrison and Walker incorporate Marxist views in their novels to critique the dominant ideology and to highlight the struggles of marginalized groups against the oppressive system.

**Keywords:** Marxism, Class struggle, Capitalism, Proletariat, Race.

### **1. Introduction**

Marxism is a critical theory that emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and aims to expose and critique the inequalities and exploitative practices in capitalist societies. Marxist theory views society as divided into two classes: **the ruling class**, who control the means of production, and **the working class**, who provide the labour. This theory is reflected in the works of many

writers who uses Marxist themes to expose the exploitative practices of the ruling class and to highlight the struggles of the working class.

Toni Morrison's *Sula* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* are two important works of fiction that explore themes of race, gender, and class in America. Both authors were influenced by Marxist theory, and their novels incorporate Marxist views to critique the dominant ideology and to highlight the struggles of marginalized groups against the oppressive system. This research paper aims to explore the Marxist views in both novels and to analyze the ways in which they depict the struggle for power and the struggle against oppression.

## **2. Marxist Theory**

Marxist theory posits that society is divided into two classes: the ruling class, who control the means of production, and the working class, who provide the labour. The ruling class exploits the working class to maintain their power and control. The struggle between the ruling class and the working class is the driving force of history. This theory is reflected in both *Sula* and *The Color Purple*.

### **Impact on the Literary World**

Marxist views in novels have had a significant impact on the literary world. These novels have explored the relationship between classes and the struggle for power between them, providing insight into the workings of society. Marxist literature has also contributed to the development of other literary movements, such as socialist realism, which focuses on the lives of working-class people.

Marxist literature has also been criticized for being overly focused on politics and not paying enough attention to aesthetics. However, many Marxist writers have responded to this criticism by arguing that their works are aesthetically valuable and that politics and aesthetics are intertwined.

### **3. Marxism in Toni Morrison's *Sula***

*Sula* is a novel that explores the lives of two black women, Sula and Nel, who grow up in a small town in Ohio. The novel explores themes of gender, race, and class and highlights the ways in which the ruling class oppresses and exploits the working class. Sula's rebellion against the dominant ideology of her community is a critique of the capitalist system that oppresses and exploits marginalized groups. Sula's unconventional lifestyle and her refusal to conform to gender roles are a rebellion against the dominant ideology of her community. The character of Shadrack, a traumatized World War I veteran, represents the struggle of the working class against the ruling class. Shadrack's inability to cope with the trauma of war is a metaphor for the ways in which the working class is traumatized by the oppressive system.

#### **Rebellion Against Dominant Ideology**

In *Sula*, Toni Morrison explores the rebellion of the main character, Sula, against the dominant ideology of her community. Sula challenges the conservative values of her hometown of Medallion, Ohio, by rejecting traditional gender roles and engaging in sexual promiscuity. Sula also rebels against the idea of the "bottom," a term used in the black community to describe the lowest social status, by asserting her own agency and identity. Her rebellion against the dominant ideology of her community ultimately leads to her being ostracized and demonized as a pariah, but it also allows her to find freedom and self-determination.

#### **Struggle for Power**

*Sula* also explores the struggle for power between different groups in society. The novel depicts the power dynamics between the black community and the white community, as well as the power dynamics between men and women. The character of Nel represents the traditional power structures of the community, as she conforms to the expectations of her gender and the dominant ideology of her community. In contrast, Sula

challenges these power structures by rejecting traditional gender roles and asserting her own agency. The struggle for power in *Sula* reflects the Marxist idea of the struggle between the ruling class and the working class.

### **Trauma of the Working Class**

*Sula* explores the trauma experienced by the working class. The character of Shadrack represents the trauma of the working class, as he struggles to cope with the horrors of war and the trauma of being an African American in a racist society. The novel also highlights the ways in which poverty and lack of resources can exacerbate trauma and create cycles of violence and abuse.

### **The Role of Community in Maintaining Power Structures**

*Sula* explores the role of community in maintaining power structures and perpetuating inequality. The community of Medallion represents a microcosm of the larger society, with power structures that reflect the Marxist idea of the ruling class and the working class. The community also reinforces the dominant ideology that perpetuates oppression and marginalization. The character of Eva represents the power of community to maintain the status quo, as she uses her influence to control and manipulate others in the community.

### **The Intersection of Race and Class**

*Sula* also explores the intersection of race and class and the ways in which these identities are used to create and perpetuate inequalities. The character of Sula, as a black woman from a poor family, faces multiple forms of oppression and marginalization. The novel exposes the ways in which the intersection of race and class can lead to unique experiences of oppression and marginalization, and how these experiences are used to

maintain the power of the ruling class.

### **The Role of Women in the Labour Force**

*Sula* also critiques the role of women in the labour force and the ways in which women are exploited for their labour. The character of Nel represents the traditional role of women in the labour force, as she sacrifices her own aspirations and desires to care for her husband and children. The character of Sula, in contrast, rejects the traditional role of women in the labour force and asserts her own agency and independence. The novel exposes the ways in which women's labour is undervalued and exploited under capitalism.

#### **4. Marxism in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple***

*The Color Purple* is a novel that explores the life of Celie, a young black woman living in the American South in the early 20th century. The novel explores the intersection of race, gender, and class and depicts the struggle of the working class against the ruling class. Celie's experiences highlight the ways in which the ruling class exploits and oppresses marginalized groups, particularly women and people of color. The character of Sofia, a strong and assertive black woman, represents the struggle of the working class against the ruling class. Sofia's rebellion against the dominant ideology of her community is a critique of the capitalist system that oppresses and exploits marginalized groups.

### **Intersection of Race, Gender, and Class**

*The Color Purple* explores the intersection of race, gender, and class through the experiences of its main character, Celie. Celie is an African American woman living in the American South during the early 20th century. She faces multiple layers of oppression and discrimination based on her race, gender, and class. The novel exposes the ways in

which these intersecting identities create unique experiences of oppression and marginalization. The Marxist lens used in the novel highlights the ways in which these intersecting identities are used to maintain the power of the ruling class and to perpetuate systems of exploitation and oppression.

### **Exploitation and Oppression of Marginalized Groups**

*The Color Purple* also exposes the exploitation and oppression of marginalized groups in society. The novel depicts the exploitation of African American sharecroppers by white landowners, as well as the exploitation of women by men. The character of Celie

experiences multiple forms of exploitation and abuse throughout the novel, including physical and sexual abuse by her father and husband. The novel critiques the capitalist system that allows for the exploitation of marginalized groups for the benefit of the ruling class.

### **Sofia's Rebellion**

The character of Sofia represents rebellion against the dominant power structures in *The Color Purple*. Sofia is a strong and independent woman who refuses to conform to traditional gender roles and the expectations of the dominant ideology of her community. Sofia's rebellion leads to her being punished and imprisoned by the ruling class, highlighting the ways in which the ruling class uses violence and oppression to maintain its power. Sofia's rebellion also represents the Marxist idea of the struggle between the ruling class and the working class, as she stands up against the power structures that seek to exploit and oppress her.

### **The Struggle for Education**

*The Color Purple* explores the struggle for education as a means of empowerment and social mobility. The character of Celie, who is illiterate at the beginning of the novel, learns to read and write and uses her education to gain independence and assert her own agency. The novel critiques the ways in which access to education is restricted under capitalism and how this perpetuates systems of inequality.

### **The Role of Religion in Perpetuating Oppression**

*The Color Purple* also critiques the role of religion in perpetuating oppression and maintaining power structures. The character of Celie is raised in a deeply religious family that uses religion to control and manipulate her. The novel exposes the ways in which

religion can be used to justify and perpetuate oppression and how it can be used as a tool of the ruling class.

### **The Importance of Solidarity and Collective Action**

*The Color Purple* highlights the importance of solidarity and collective action in challenging power structures and creating change. The character of Shug Avery represents the importance of collective action in the fight against oppression, as she inspires Celie to assert her own agency and fight for her own liberation. The novel critiques the individualistic nature of capitalism and the importance of collective action in creating a more just and equitable society.

## **5. Comparison and Contrast of the Novels**

### **Similarities in the novels**

*Sula* by Toni Morrison and *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker are both novels that explore the lives of African American women and their struggles for self-discovery, independence, and agency in a society that is oppressive and discriminatory. Both novels also address the theme of sexuality and the impact of gender roles and societal expectations on women's lives. *Sula's* unconventional sexuality and rejection of traditional gender roles challenges the norms of her community, while Celie's experiences of sexual abuse and exploitation highlight the vulnerability of women in a patriarchal society.

### **Differences in the Novels**

While both novels explore similar Marxist themes, they differ in their narrative structures. *Sula* is structured as a series of vignettes, each of which explores a different aspect of the lives of the characters. The novel jumps back and forth in time, and the



narrative is not always linear. In contrast, *The Color Purple* is a more traditional narrative, with a clear chronological structure. The novel is written in the form of letters from Celie to God, which allows the reader to see the evolution of Celie's character and her relationship with other characters in the novel.

## 6. Conclusion

Marxist views in novels have explored the struggle for power between the ruling class and the working class. These novels have had a significant impact on the literary world, providing insight into the workings of society and contributing to the development of other literary movements. While Marxist literature has been criticized for being overly focused on politics, many writers have argued that their works are aesthetically valuable and that politics and aesthetics are intertwined.

Both *Sula* and *The Color Purple* are important works of fiction that explore themes of race, gender, and class through a Marxist lens. Both novels critique the dominant ideology of their respective communities, and highlight the struggles of the working class against the ruling class. While the novels share similar Marxist themes, they differ in their narrative structures. *Sula's* non-linear structure and use of vignettes allows for a more fragmented exploration of the characters and their lives, while *The Color Purple's* traditional narrative structure allows for a more in-depth exploration of Celie's character and her relationships. Overall, both novels use Marxist themes to expose and critique the inequalities and exploitative practices in capitalist societies, and to highlight the struggles of marginalized groups against the oppressive system.

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