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Exploring Women’s Studies

Paper 1

Sula: Being a feminist doesn’t mean hating men

The type of feminism that has been portrayed by Toni Morriston in her novel ‘Sula aims at proving that to be a feminist, it isn’t necessary that you hate men. To understand how the portrayal of feminism in the novel is different than what people presume feminism to be, it is first important to learn the difference between feminism and pseudo-feminism.

An extract of a paragraph from bell hooks' book, ‘Feminism is for everybody, portrays how people perceive feminism to be. "Mostly they think feminism is a bunch of angry women who want to be like men. They do not even think about feminism as being about rights - about women gaining equal rights” (Hooks #). This is an accurate representation of people’s perceptions regarding feminism in society.

Especially men, who are used to patriarchy so much, they are terrified of having that power stripped away. So, to protect their image of masculinity, they try to twist feminism into something it’s not. She also proceeds to mention that when these same people are asked how they know about their experience with feminism, they are introduced to it through a third party and have never firsthand attempted to understand what it’s all about. The conclusion that can be drawn from this is that people usually confuse feminism with pseudo-feminism. To understand what the true essence of feminism is, it is first necessary to understand how these two concepts are different.

A widely used definition of feminism believes it to be a belief in and advocacy of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes expressed especially through organized activity on behalf of women's rights and interests (“Feminism Definition & Meaning”). It is a political philosophy that supports giving women the same social, political, and other rights as men. The words' genuine meaning implies that neither gender should be treated differently from the other. Egality, not condemning individuals based on their decisions, is at the heart of feminism. According to the Urban Dictionary, pseudo-feminists are people who claim to be a feminist yet ignores the main point of feminism, equality (“Pseudo-Feminism”). Pseudo-feminists often rant about how bad men are or assume that men don't experience gender-related societal difficulties. By targeting and insulting men, pseudo-feminism seeks to end all injustices against women. It may be true for some men to have had caused certain unpleasant experiences, but why generalize that to all men? This is a vicious comment that many people have seen on social media. These are the ideas that pseudo-feminists propagate, and some people agree with them.

Although it is based in the 1900s, the representation of feminism in Sula is way ahead of its time. Because Hannah and Sula Peace are the antithesis of traditional women who are subjugated and dependent on men, author Toni Morrison uses these characters to create feminist fiction in her book Sula. In the novel, we can see these women being unapologetically themself, which is the whole essence of feminism. They don’t succumb to society’s rules of what women should be like and rebel against them in their own way. None of these ways, however, involve bashing men in any way. In fact, throughout the story, it has been shown that the women in the Peace household have a soft corner for men.

The first example of this would be when BoyBoy left Eva after five years of marriage leaving her with almost nothing. In that situation, Eva had every right in the world to be mad at BoyBoy and start badmouthing men. However, she didn’t do that. She knew that she had children to take care of and she couldn’t live off other people’s niceness forever. She, as the author quoted, “had to postpone her anger for two years until she had both the time and the energy for it.” This shows that Eva knew what being a strong woman meant. It was about making sure she and her family were going to be okay before going out and starting to hate men. Even when he came back to visit her years later, she welcomed him with a smile and some homemade lemonade. Although it has been mentioned that Eva later realized that she felt hatred towards BoyBoy, she never really acted on it.

The author mentions in the book that, ‘With the exception of BoyBoy, those Peace women loved all men.’ This is something that has been bequeathed to all women of the peace family. They all show their feminism in different ways without including hating on men. All the women in the novel portray the essence of feminism in their own ways. Hannah, Eva’s daughter achieves this by doing whatever makes her happy, which includes staying single, having sex just for fun, and not giving parenting much thought. Morrison claims that even though she would "fuck nearly anything," sleeping with someone suggested her some level of commitment and trust. Hannah has sex with these men simply for her personal enjoyment; she is not doing it out of loyalty or affection. Morrison shows Hannah as being independent and acting in ways that make her feel good about herself by using these incentives. For Hannah, being a feminist meant putting her own needs before anyone else’s.

A woman's sexuality has always been a topic of scrutiny in society. Especially during the time the book was written, it probably was even worse. Yet, we can still see how open the women in the books are about their sexuality. They don’t look at it like it is something they are ashamed of, instead, they treat it like something that should be embraced. Although this might not seem like a big deal in today's era, if we keep in mind that this story dates back to the mid-1900s, we can recognize how bold of an action it was. This action, in no way, indicates that she hated men. In fact, she adored the male kind. She indulged with them for her own pleasure and not because she lacked respect for them.

Sula (Hanna’s daughter and Eva’s granddaughter) had her own way of contracting what society believed an ideal woman should act like. Sula has been very outspoken since she was a child and has always acted impulsively. However, she is shown to be a feminist in the sense that she believes she won’t ever need a man to fulfill her purpose in life. She is strongly against the traditional view that a woman's purpose is just to marry and spend the rest of their life looking after the children. However, at no point in the novel has it been illustrated that she was anti-men. In fact, like her mother, she too was seemingly fond of the men in the neighborhood. She even went as far as sleeping with her best friend's husband just to prove a point. She claimed that the only reason she did that was that he filled a void in her head, nothing more.

Overall, the idea of feminism portrayed in Toni Morrison's Sula is very contradictory to what people believe feminism to mean. It emphasizes more on how girls shouldn't grow up believing that they must choose a particular path to be the ideal woman, and they most definitely shouldn't live in a society that exclusively seeks to prepare them for being the ideal housewife. Every action girls take should be a decision, just like it is for guys. It doesn’t revolve around needing to hate or bring men down to be called a feminist. Despite the fact that feminism is as subtle and broad as it is vast, Misandry has never had a place in feminism.

Works Cited

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Hrizu, your application of the concept “feminism” to Morrison’s novel, Sula, is a thought-provoking one because of your attempts to define it using bell hook’s discussion of feminism and because of your decision to contrast it to a “psuedo-feminism” which you define as a unilateral hatred of men in the pursuit of feminism. Your revision develops the focus and details of the analysis in helpful ways as suggested by margin comments. As my comments also indicate, however, sometimes the analysis could be developed more fully and clearly. See margin comments for additional feedback and suggestions.

GRADE: B+