



TRACING THE NEW WOMAN: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SISTER CARRIE AND OYIMTILLA

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Abstract

This paper explores the emergence and representation of the "New Woman" through the protagonists of two culturally distinct novels: Caroline Meeber in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* and Nilufar in Zulfiya Qurolboy qizi's *Oyimtilla*. By comparing these characters, the study highlights how female identity, agency, and aspirations are shaped within differing socio-cultural and historical contexts—turn-of-the-century industrial America and post-independence Uzbekistan. Through a comparative literary analysis, the research investigates the characters' psychological development, their resistance to traditional gender norms, and the extent to which they embody the concept of the "New Woman." The paper aims to demonstrate how both authors portray women navigating societal expectations while seeking personal autonomy, thereby enriching the literary discourse on women's evolving roles in modern society.

Keywords: New Woman, Caroline Meeber, Nilufar, *Sister Carrie*, *Oyimtilla*, female identity, gender roles, comparative literature, women's emancipation, feminist literary analysis

Introduction

The figure of the "New Woman" emerged as a powerful literary and cultural symbol at the turn of the twentieth century, reflecting the growing desire among women for independence, education, and self-realization. This archetype challenged traditional gender roles and became a focal point for writers addressing the complexities of modern womanhood. In Western literature,



Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) stands as a seminal work in portraying a young woman's journey from provincial obscurity to urban independence. Meanwhile, in contemporary Uzbek literature, Zulfiya Qurolboy qizi's *Oyimtilla* presents Nilufar, a young woman who also navigates the tensions between societal expectations and personal freedom in a post-Soviet context.

This paper conducts a comparative analysis of the protagonists Caroline Meeber and Nilufar to examine how each character embodies the ideals and struggles of the New Woman. Despite the differences in cultural and historical settings, both characters represent a shift toward female agency and self-definition. The study seeks to uncover how their individual paths reflect broader social changes and contribute to evolving literary representations of women. By exploring these parallels and contrasts, the paper aims to illuminate how the concept of the New Woman transcends cultural boundaries while retaining unique local features.

Comparative analysis

The literary portrayal of Caroline Meeber in *Sister Carrie* and Nilufar in *Oyimtilla* presents a compelling parallel in the development of the New Woman across distinct cultural and historical contexts. Both characters navigate male-dominated societies, yet each responds to her environment in ways that reflect the values, expectations, and limitations of her time and place.

Caroline Meeber's journey is marked by her transition from a passive, small-town girl to an ambitious woman who gains success in the urban world of Chicago and New York. Dreiser's depiction of Carrie emphasizes her psychological transformation and growing independence, although her rise is not without moral ambiguity. Carrie does not consciously seek to defy social norms, but her choices — including relationships outside of marriage and the pursuit of a stage career — position her as a symbol of the modern, self-determining woman.

In contrast, Nilufar in *Oyimtilla* emerges within a post-Soviet Uzbek society where tradition still exerts significant influence on women's roles. Despite familial and societal pressure, Nilufar strives to assert her identity, challenge patriarchal expectations, and make independent life decisions. Her internal struggle is more ideologically conscious than Carrie's; she reflects on her role as a woman, an intellectual, and a citizen in a rapidly modernizing society. While



Carrie's empowerment is largely economic and accidental, Nilufar's is intellectual and moral. Carrie adapts to her circumstances and benefits from opportunities presented to her, whereas Nilufar actively resists constraints and seeks purpose beyond material gain. However, both characters embody the New Woman's key traits: autonomy, self-reflection, and a desire for personal fulfillment.

The comparative lens reveals that the New Woman, though shaped by differing societal forces, shares core attributes across literatures — particularly in challenging traditional female archetypes. Through these protagonists, Dreiser and Qurolboy qizi contribute to the global discourse on female emancipation, each offering a culturally specific yet universally resonant vision of womanhood.

Literature review

The concept of the "New Woman" has been widely discussed in literary and feminist criticism, particularly in the context of late 19th and early 20th-century Western literature. Scholars such as Elaine Showalter and Sandra Gilbert have examined how female characters in literature began to reflect changing gender roles, questioning domesticity and seeking independence. In the American literary tradition, *Sister Carrie* is often cited as a foundational text portraying the New Woman, where Caroline Meeber becomes a symbol of self-made modern femininity in an urban capitalist society. Critics note how Dreiser challenges the moral binaries of his time, offering a nuanced character who does not conform to traditional virtues yet evokes empathy and respect.

In the Uzbek literary context, discussions of gender identity and women's emancipation have gained traction in the post-Soviet era. Scholars have explored how contemporary female authors, including Zulfiya Qurolboy qizi, depict women who confront societal expectations and attempt to redefine their roles. While literature on Oyimtilla remains limited, emerging studies emphasize its progressive portrayal of women like Nilufar, who strive for intellectual freedom and social agency. Comparative studies between Western and Central Asian female archetypes are still scarce, making this paper a valuable contribution to the cross-cultural exploration of the New Woman figure.



Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in feminist literary theory, with a particular focus on the concept of the “New Woman” as a central analytical lens. The term “New Woman,” first popularized in the late 19th century by writers such as Sarah Grand and later theorized by critics like Elaine Showalter, refers to a literary and social archetype of a woman who challenges traditional gender roles, seeks autonomy, and aspires to intellectual, economic, and emotional independence.

Elaine Showalter’s theory of gynocriticism, which emphasizes studying women’s literature on its own terms — focusing on female experience, voice, and literary tradition — is particularly relevant to this analysis. Showalter encourages scholars to look at how female characters are constructed not just in opposition to male norms, but in ways that reflect women’s inner worlds, social pressures, and evolving identities. In both *Sister Carrie* and *Oyimtilla*, the protagonists embody this tension between inner desire and outer social constraint.

Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity also informs this study. Butler argues that gender is not a stable identity but a repeated performance shaped by social expectations. Caroline Meeber and Nilufar both perform — and in some cases, subvert — expected feminine roles. Their personal choices, public personas, and resistance to conventional womanhood reflect the performative nature of gender in their respective societies.

In addition, Simone de Beauvoir’s seminal assertion in *The Second Sex* — that “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” — underlines the protagonists’ journeys toward self-definition. Both Caroline and Nilufar, in different ways, resist being passively shaped by their cultures and instead seek to redefine themselves on their own terms. By applying these feminist frameworks, the study positions *Sister Carrie* and *Oyimtilla* within a broader discourse on women’s liberation, identity formation, and cultural transformation. The theoretical lens highlights not only the similarities in the heroines’ struggles but also the distinct cultural forces that shape their paths.

Methodology

This study employs a comparative literary analysis approach, focusing on character construction, narrative development, and thematic motifs in *Sister*



Carrie and Oyimtilla. The analysis is framed through feminist literary theory, particularly the New Woman discourse, and incorporates both textual and contextual interpretation. Caroline Meeber and Nilufar are examined as central figures who reflect and resist the gender norms of their respective societies.

The research involves close reading of both texts, supported by secondary academic sources that discuss the New Woman, gender roles, and socio-historical background in American and Uzbek literature. The aim is not only to highlight similarities and differences between the two characters but also to understand how each represents a unique version of female emancipation within her own cultural framework.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of Sister Carrie and Oyimtilla reveals the enduring relevance of the New Woman archetype across diverse literary traditions. Both Caroline Meeber and Nilufar reflect a departure from traditional female roles, challenging patriarchal constraints and asserting their individuality. While their journeys unfold in different socio-historical landscapes—industrial America and post-Soviet Uzbekistan—their struggles for identity, autonomy, and purpose resonate with universal themes of women's emancipation.

Caroline's transformation is shaped by urban capitalism and her passive adaptation to opportunity, whereas Nilufar's empowerment emerges through conscious resistance and intellectual maturity. These differences underscore the cultural specificities of the New Woman ideal, while their shared traits—ambition, introspection, and resilience—highlight its global dimensions. By examining these two characters side by side, this study contributes to the broader discourse on gender and literature, emphasizing the importance of cross-cultural perspectives in understanding the evolution of women's roles in fiction and society.

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