

NATURALISM AND IDENTITY IN "SISTER CARRIE"

Mamatova Dilorom A'zam qizi

Department of Foreign Languages

Qarshi State Technical University

Email: dilorombobur567@gmail.com

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Abstract: This article examines the theme of identity in Theodore Dreiser's novel *Sister Carrie* through the lens of literary naturalism. It argues that Dreiser presents identity not as a fixed or inherent trait but as a product of environmental forces, social conditions, and unconscious desires. By tracing Carrie Meeber's transformation from a naïve country girl to a stage actress, the article explores how her sense of self is shaped—and fragmented—by the urban landscape, economic pressures, and emotional disillusionment. The study reveals how Dreiser's naturalist vision deconstructs the myth of individual autonomy, illustrating instead a model of identity that is contingent, unstable, and deeply intertwined with the forces of modernity.

Keywords: *Sister Carrie*, naturalism, identity, Theodore Dreiser, modernity, urban experience, determinism

Introduction

Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900) is widely regarded as a landmark of American literary naturalism. The novel not only challenges the moral conventions of its time but also interrogates the nature of selfhood in the modern world. Carrie Meeber, the protagonist, undergoes a dramatic transformation in the course of the narrative, but this transformation is not portrayed as the result of deliberate will or personal insight. Rather, it emerges from her exposure to the rapidly changing social and economic environment of the city. In Dreiser's naturalist framework, identity is fluid, fragmented, and often shaped by external circumstances beyond the individual's control. This article explores how Dreiser uses naturalistic techniques to depict the evolution of Carrie's identity, and how this reflects broader themes of determinism, alienation, and the search for meaning in an impersonal society.

Naturalism, as developed by writers such as Emile Zola and later adopted by Dreiser, emphasizes the role of environment, heredity, and social conditions in shaping human behavior. In *Sister Carrie*, these forces are ever-present. Carrie's decisions—from accepting help from Drouet to leaving Hurstwood—are influenced more by circumstance than by moral deliberation. Dreiser denies the notion of a unified, autonomous self; instead, he presents individuals as products of the forces that act upon them. Carrie's shifting identity—first as a dependent,

then a mistress, and finally a performer—demonstrates how selfhood is not chosen but constructed through adaptation and survival. Furthermore, Dreiser's characters act not from moral conviction, but from instinct, desire, and necessity.

Dreiser's naturalism resists traditional literary heroism. Carrie is not punished for her ambition nor celebrated for her independence; rather, she is portrayed as a living being subject to the unpredictable dynamics of urban life. This represents a critical departure from 19th-century literature, where characters often faced clear moral consequences. In Dreiser's world, characters exist in a morally neutral space, where survival is dictated by adaptability, not virtue.

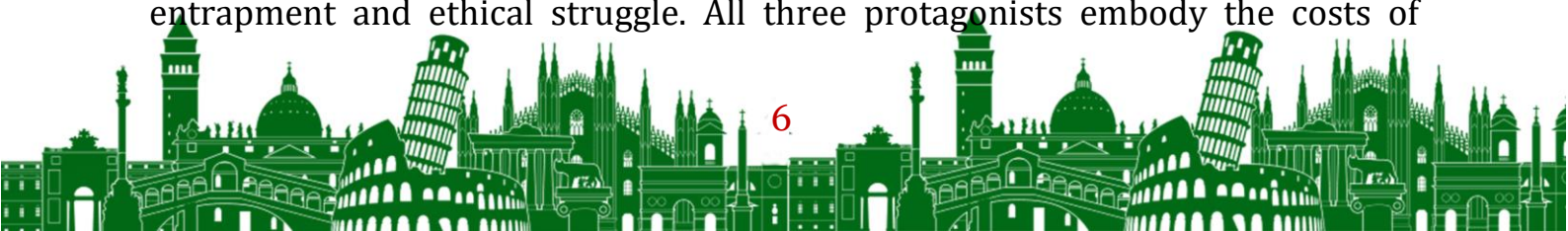
Comparative analysis

Zulfiya Qurolboy qizi's *Oyimtilla* and Iqbol Mirzo's *Bonu* similarly focus on women whose identities are constructed and contested within patriarchal social orders. Like Carrie, the protagonists of these Uzbek novels—Nilufar in *Oyimtilla* and the titular Bonu in *Bonu*—struggle to assert their individuality in environments shaped by tradition, gender expectations, and social control.

In *Oyimtilla*, Nilufar's identity is fractured between familial obligations and personal aspirations. Though she is not seeking fame or urban glamour like Carrie, Nilufar faces a similar alienation—her emotional needs are suppressed by cultural expectations of obedience and silence. The novel's depiction of reproductive conflict, societal pressure, and the emotional toll of repression reflects a kindred naturalist theme: the self as victim of surrounding forces. Unlike Dreiser, however, Qurolboy qizi infuses her narrative with implicit feminist resistance. Nilufar's tragic fate is not just a product of circumstance but also a critique of the structures that deny women agency.

Iqbol Mirzo's *Bonu* presents a more intellectualized, introspective woman. Bonu navigates social injustice and personal loss while engaging in philosophical reflection on freedom and sacrifice. Her struggle is less about material survival and more about spiritual and ideological identity. Unlike Carrie, Bonu is not seduced by the external symbols of success but rather seeks purpose within societal constraints. Still, both characters represent a "modern woman" archetype who is dislocated from tradition and striving toward self-definition in a society that resists change.

These comparisons show that while *Sister Carrie* emphasizes psychological realism and urban materialism, *Oyimtilla* and *Bonu* highlight cultural entrapment and ethical struggle. All three protagonists embody the costs of



modernization for women—whether through commodification, repression, or moral compromise. Despite geographic and ideological distances, these novels collectively reveal the fragility of female identity in patriarchal, transitional societies.

Literature review

The body of scholarship on Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* is extensive, with critics highlighting its naturalistic framework, critique of the American Dream, and exploration of female identity. Donald Pizer, a leading Dreiser scholar, emphasizes the novel's significance in shaping American literary naturalism by focusing on determinism and the interplay of character and circumstance. Amy Kaplan interprets the novel's romantic undertones as ironic, suggesting Dreiser critiques sentimental traditions through Carrie's ascent. Thomas Riggio explores the urban context of the novel, identifying the city as a formative agent of character development and alienation.

In contrast, critical literature on contemporary Uzbek novels such as *Oyimtilla* and *Bonu* is still emerging. However, scholars have noted Zulfiya Qurolboy qizi's work as a reflection of women's silent suffering under sociocultural repression. In particular, her use of psychological realism and reproductive conflict has been interpreted as a feminist critique of traditional Uzbek society. Iqbol Mirzo's *Bonu* has been praised for its lyrical narrative style and philosophical depth, addressing existential questions within the bounds of social morality. These works are increasingly being studied within the context of post-Soviet identity, gender studies, and comparative literature.

Though Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* emerges from a Western industrial capitalist society and the Uzbek novels stem from post-Soviet Central Asian traditions, literary critics are beginning to explore their intersections—especially around themes of female agency, modernity, and psychological dislocation. This article aims to bridge that scholarly gap by situating these culturally distinct works within a shared framework of naturalism and identity formation.

Methodology

This study adopts a comparative literary analysis method, focusing on thematic, contextual, and stylistic parallels between *Sister Carrie*, *Oyimtilla*, and *Bonu*. The primary method is close reading of the texts with attention to narrative structure, character development, and symbolic motifs related to identity formation. The research also applies interdisciplinary approaches—drawing from feminist theory, naturalist criticism, and cultural studies—to examine how female protagonists in each novel respond to their environments.



The method includes textual comparison of key scenes and motifs, such as urban space, emotional alienation, and societal expectations. Contextual analysis is used to understand how historical and socio-political conditions in both turn-of-the-century America and post-Soviet Uzbekistan influence literary representations of women. This comparative approach allows for identifying both universal and culturally specific aspects of identity construction under conditions of social constraint and transformation.

Determinism and the Illusion of Choice

Dreiser's portrayal of identity is deeply tied to naturalist determinism. Carrie often seems to act freely, but her choices are consistently shaped by economic necessity, emotional vulnerability, and cultural forces. Even her ascent to stardom is not portrayed as a triumph of will, but rather as the cumulative result of chance encounters and situational advantages. Dreiser's characters are not heroes or villains—they are organisms responding to their surroundings. Carrie's identity evolves not through reflection but through reaction.

Moreover, Dreiser critiques the ideological promise of the American Dream. Carrie's rise seems to affirm that dream—yet her inner life contradicts it. Her discontent exposes the failure of a system that equates material gain with personal fulfillment. In doing so, Dreiser anticipates later existential and postmodern concerns with fragmentation, alienation, and the constructed nature of identity.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of *Sister Carrie*, *Oyimtilla*, and *Bonu* demonstrates the enduring relevance of naturalist and realist techniques in portraying the fragmented identities of women in transitional societies. Each novel presents a female protagonist who is shaped—often constrained—by powerful socio-economic and cultural forces. Carrie, Nilufar, and Bonu differ in their responses to these forces: Carrie adapts and performs to survive in a capitalist urban world; Nilufar suffers in silence under patriarchal norms; and Bonu reflects inwardly while challenging moral expectations.

Despite originating in different literary traditions, the three works share thematic concerns about autonomy, alienation, and self-construction. Through their protagonists, the novels critique societal structures that limit women's freedom and personal growth. Dreiser's portrayal of Carrie aligns with naturalist determinism and critiques the illusion of the American Dream. In contrast, *Oyimtilla* and *Bonu* offer introspective, culturally grounded examinations of women navigating post-Soviet Uzbek society.



Ultimately, this study affirms that identity is not a static or self-determined construct but one that evolves through interactions with external conditions. Whether in industrial America or modernizing Uzbekistan, women's search for selfhood remains fraught with contradiction and resistance. The comparative lens enriches our understanding of how literature from diverse traditions captures the universal—and uniquely local—dimensions of that search.

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