

GENDER IN RELATION TO RACE AND CLASS: SULA

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Abstract

The present article aims at making an in-depth study of the interrelationship of race, gender, and class in Toni Morrison's novel *Sula*. Morrison's primary focus is on gender, especially the individualism of the African woman. The concept of gender and its relation to race and class is very much a part of the novel. The manner in which Morrison chooses to explore the nature of the woman's oppression is unique. She creates two female characters –Nel and Sula- neither of whom is complete in herself. The idea that Nel and Sula represent two halves of one person reverberates throughout the novel.

Key Words: Racism and Sexism, Bottom, Monogamy, Pariah, Dialectical Relationships.

INTRODUCTION

The major predicament that Morrison considers in the novel *Sula* is two-fold -the effect of racism and sexism upon the identity formation of the black female. In an interview conducted by Colette Dowling, Morrison states that “blacks, if they are to succeed in American society, must leave their native communities, and in so doing, cut themselves off from their old lives.”¹

In *Sula* Morrison captures most profoundly the way concepts of good and evil are related to societal definitions of woman. For the Bottom, a Black community located in the hills above the fictional town of Medallion, Ohio, that definition has much to do with the status of black people within the larger society, which ironically is the basis for the adventure and rebellion that *Sula* represents.

Despite its periodic inclusion of racial concerns and its incidental incorporation of class-related issues, the novel begins and ends with an exposition of individual rather than group fulfillment. *Sula*, the protagonist of the novel, suffers not only at the hands of whites but also at the hands of blacks. That is why; she rejects the traditional role ascribed to women in society.

Thus in *Sula*, Morrison's focus shifts to the black woman as an individual, struggling towards freedom and selfhood as in Alice Walker's *Meridian*. Though their literary visions are shaped by different perspectives, Morrison and Walker speak a similar truth out of their “collective consciousness” and create

women who are “spiritual sisters”. *Sula* and *Meridian* are ‘spiritual sisters’, though superficially no two women could be more different. *Meridian* is a young, pure, saintly woman of the South who has functioned in the roles of wife and mother. *Sula*, on the other hand is a defiant woman of the Midwest who has been neither wife nor mother. What, however, they have in common is “intense desire to give birth to themselves as persons.”² Their individual quests for selfhood are precipitated by different personal needs and reflect different attitudes toward the human condition. The stages of their journeys towards selfhood are decidedly different. But “goals of their quests are the same --- a cleaner understanding of self, and expanded room in which to hum their own melodies and sing their own lyrics.”³ There is a formidable struggle, for they live in societies which censure individual expression especially for women. All the same, they flourish and evolve into a prototype for psychic wholeness and individual autonomy.

Sula is fundamentally a woman's novel in the sense that it concerns itself with the feeling and affairs of women and the roles they assume, whether by choice or force. It chronicles the fortunes of women in two matriarchal households within the black community whose lives represent the range of choices possible for black women in white America. Even though a good deal of the action of the novel derives from the consequences of male and female relationships, it is the self-perception of woman and her subsequent reactions to self-concept that are central to it. The male characters undergo no development, play no major roles, and they are

important only because of the reactions they might prompt or provoke from the females. For the most part of the men are “superficial, immature, untrustworthy, and anonymous, as is suggested by their names-Juse(Judas), Green(naïve), Boy-Boy(infantile), Chicken Little(fearful and diminutive), the Deweys(anonymous).”⁴ The negative aspects of their names are most visible when juxtaposed with the empowering names of the women. The men’s behaviour, including Ajax’s, is less than heroic. Each man leaves a community of abandoned women. This abandonment becomes the impetus for Eva, the paradigmatic woman who rebounds through assertiveness and self-reliance after she and her children are deserted by her husband.

The oppression of African women in the United States, especially in the first quarter of the twentieth century, is documented throughout the novel. The manner in which Morrison chooses to explore the nature of the woman’s oppression is unique. She creates two female characters-Nel and Sula-neither of whom is complete in herself. The idea that Nel and Sula returns to Bottom, Nel thinks that her friend’s return is like ‘getting an eye back’ and that talking to Sula has always been ‘a conversation with herself.’ Significant too is the authorial comment: “their friendship was so close; they themselves had difficulty distinguishing one’s thoughts from others.”⁵

Nel and Sula, then, are separate facets or faces of one being. Morrison suggests that to attain an ideal and holistic personality, “the part embodied in Sula has to be wedded to the safe, conventional part represented by Nel.”⁶

For Nel and Sula the problem of one’s loss of identity is a direct result of the Bottom’s limiting definition of women as subservient, self-sacrificing being. Nel assumes the traditional role the community prescribes, and retains her social identity, through her personal identity is non-existent. Sula, by contrast, is a free-spirited woman whose determination to define herself places her at odds with the culturally rich black community. Hers is the psychological dilemma out of touch with the historic Black past. In their quests for wholeness both women find their world rife with contradictions and tensions. As M.L. Montgomery observes, Nel and Sula “experience a profound sense of alienation in a patriarchal world which evolves no terms for their existence.”⁷

Morrison’s most articulate statement regarding the degradation of female comes in a passage that appears after the first meeting of Nel and Sula: because each had discovered years before they

were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be. (52)

Within this statement are found both the dilemma of the novel and its solution. African women are oppressed and, to escape their oppression, they must become self-propagators. Accordingly, Sula rejects the traditional role ascribed to women. However, since her oppression as a woman is the result of an oppressive economic system, not men, Sula finds it impossible to escape all the traditionalisms associated with women.

As a contemporary novel about female friendship, *Sula* “offers a view of female psychological development that defies traditional male-centered interpretations of female development and calls out for an expansion of the women-centred paradigm.”⁸ It is a deep study of friendship between the two black girls-Nel and Sula-growing into womanhood that serves as the periscope through which the tremendous contradictions of life are viewed. Their broken lives speak of the depth of their agony which is the result of the loss of identity at the cultural, gender, and racial planes: “their broken friendship is a measure of their broken lives, lives that are cramped from the very start. As counterpoints, all the other women in *Sula* must either fit themselves into the place life has set for them or defy it with tragic circumstances proportionate to their degree of non-accommodation.”⁹ Nel and Sula, seek solace in each other’s company because they share the common bond of being young, black and female in a world that is commonly geared to meet the designs of mature, white males. From drastically different social backgrounds, Nel and Sula are bound by factors much stronger than those which might tend to separate them.

Sula develops her intense friendship with Nel at the age of twelve. Each girl receives from the other security, love and identity blatantly denied to them in their homes. Barbara Smith writes that the friendship between Nel and Sula is an example of “the necessary bonding that has always taken place between Black Women for the barest survival. Together the two girls can find the courage to create themselves.”¹⁰

Together Sula and Nel enter puberty, together they discover boys and together they become aware of their own sexuality.

The intense friendship between Nel and Sula invariably reminds us of a similar kinship between

Rosalind and Celia in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. Though Rosalind and Celia are cousins, they are more like bosom friends so closely attached to each other. The attachment between them is driven home to us when the banishment of Rosalind as a traitor by Frederick provokes Celia to protest against it saying: If she be a traitor, why, so am I; We still have slept together, Rose at an instant, learn'd, play'd, eat together; And wheresoever's we went, like Juno's swans, Still we want coupled and inseparable. (I, iii, 68-72) Naturally, Nel recognizes Sula as her alter ego.

Nel and Sula represent the two sides of the coin that stands for the total human personality. Both of them are Morrison's favourite characters since they are symbolic of the good and the evil persistently present in the society. Morrison says: "yet Sula and Nel are very much alike. They compliment each other. They support each other. I suppose the two of them together could have made a wonderful single human being. They are like a Janus' head."¹¹

The height of intimacy and friendship between Sula and Nel makes explicit what can be called their interesting life-long bond:

Their friendship was as intense as it was sudden. They found relief in each other's personality. Although both were unshaped, formless things, Nel seemed stronger and more consistent than Sula, who could hardly be counted on to sustain any emotion for more than three minutes. (53)

Although Nel and Sula share these strong bonds, they are different from each other in several respects. Sula is emotional and adventurous and Nel is cautious and consistent. Whereas Nel becomes a slave to sexism and racism, Sula becomes a liberated woman. The standard of womanhood that Nel represents is not the pure image of the ideal southern lady, but one based on the status of working-class black men in the society. This role is seen by Nel's community as good, while Sula is seen as evil. For, Sula not only refuses the role, but steps outside the caste of woman, beyond any class definition within that caste, when she insists on making herself. She is interested neither in being beautiful nor becoming a mother. She keeps herself outside the sex, race, and class definitions of the society. Her becoming a pariah in her own community has much to do with her resistance to any clearly recognizable definition of a woman that the Bottom can tolerate.

Not only Nel and Sula but also their families contrast

with each other. Nel's tense mother, Helene, barricades herself against racial humiliation. She rubs away all Nel's spontaneity negating her quest for identity. Conversely, Sula's mother, who is class-conscious and precise about her manners, manipulates and turns her into an obedient daughter. Sula and Nel are, thus, isolated from their own mothers.

The relationship of Nel and Sula with men seems no stronger than their relationships with their families. Nel marries Jude out of sheer pity for his plight, but when loses her husband to Sula's careless seduction, she knows that she will have no other men. As a grand daughter of a woman abandoned by her husband and a daughter of a woman exploited by men, Sula contemptuously uses black men and white men until she is deserted by the man she loves. Nel and Sula live in a world in which women must survive without men.

Nel and Sula also radically differ from each other in their attitudes to society. Whereas Nel listlessly observes the conventions of the society, Sula flouts them. She breaks all the rules that reflect the community's traditional values and becomes a pariah living outside the laws and mores of the community. She remains a social outsider as she defies the role she is supposed to play in society. Freeing herself from the narrow confines of traditional woman, she rebels against the set norms for woman's behaviour in the black community. She defies the traditional gender system that restricts female autonomy. What is more, by appropriating male prerogatives, she, in effect, abandons her sex and becomes a monstrous perversion of the passive nature that has been socially constructed for women. She summarily rejects the advice of settling down and having babies saying:

I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself. (92)

This rebellious spirit of Sula alienates her from her only friend, Nel. When the final, terrible test of Nel's friendship with Sula comes, she turns her back on love and affirmation and finds refuge, in that hardness and in isolation. Nel enjoys domestic bliss with Jude until Sula returns to destroy it. When Sula learns the pleasures of companionship, Ajax deserts her. Thus "both women are alone at the end,-Nel in life and Sula in death-contemplating the futility of their search for wholeness in monogamy and domesticity."¹²

Sula is an acutely sensitive, enigmatic, and defiant woman whose nonconformity is a "living criticism ... of

the dreadful lives of resignation other women live.”¹³ As a young girl she so startles the community with her extreme emotional impulses that her growth into a ‘strange, strong and independent woman’ is all but predictable. She rejects ‘behavioral standards of all kinds’ and attempts to ‘rely solely on herself.’ It is to herself, and only to herself that Sula wishes to be good. She is firmly of the view that

Being good to somebody is just like being mean to somebody. Risky. You don’t get nothing for it. (35)

Thus, unlike Pecola, Sula lives out her own fantasies, creates her own realities, and sets her own personal objectives. In short, she is motivated by a firm sense of “Me-ness”

Sula openly challenges the limitations imposed on her individuality and, much to the consternation of the community, vengefully disregards time-honoured conventions and traditions. She categorically rejects the standards ‘others’ use to measure her life. The profundity of Sula’s defiance is a reflection of the sharp contrast between who she is and what the Bottom decrees for its women. Thus, Sula is a pariah whose values are often the polar opposites of those adopted by her provincial society. “She becomes a pariah precisely because she rejects those values that aim at uniformity and stifle the self.”¹⁴ “Her willingness to reject them ‘makes her evil’ to those in the community who never express their own ‘freedom of the will.’ Sula is ‘evil’ because she, unlike Nel does not live ‘totally by the law’ nor surrender ‘completely to it without questioning anything sometimes’ and is ‘perfectly willing to think the unthinkable.’”¹⁵

Sula’s rebelliousness manifests itself in several ways. Unlike other Medallion women, she refuses to marry, settle down, and raise a family. She feels no obligation to please any one. As she confesses to Nel:

“I got my mind. And what goes on in it. Her determination to achieve self-fulfilment allows her ‘to live in the world’” (43), but not be caught up in the spiderweb-like life of the Bottom where she would be called upon to confirm,

“to dangle in dry places suspended by (her) own spittle more terrified of the free fall than the snake’s breath below”(103-104)

Though Morrison succeeds brilliantly in her treatment of Sula’s rebelliousness, she is less convincing in her depiction of the impact that racism and sexism together have on Sula’s defiance. She writes of

Sula’s discovery that being neither white nor male means denial of ‘freedom and triumph’. But, a careful reading of the novel reveals that Morrison’s emphasis is on sexual restrictions. It is sexism that counts most in Morrison’s portrait of Sula.

To illustrate the point, when Sula speaks despairingly of black women’s self-denial, she means their willing submission to black men. When she chafes at the notion of ‘full surrender’, she means sexual surrender. When she demonstrates the ‘self’ she has created, she does so in a black environment in relationship with black men and black women. And when she reneges on her promise to create ‘something else to be’, she does so in surrender to a black man. This surrender is the most conclusive argument against Barbara Smith’s thesis of latent lesbianism. The sexist approach to women confers upon men the obligation to protect women because they are frail or to pamper them because they are like children in their inability to plan their own lives. In an interview Morrison explains that, “the very thing that would attract a man to a woman in the first place might be the one thing she would give over once she falls in love.”¹⁶

In Sula’s case, she gives up her independence, her toughness, and her wholeness to become Ajax’s woman. Not realizing the dialectical relationships between the collective and individual interests, Sula ultimately betrays and alienates family, friends, and neighbours, thereby causing her own death.

Sula, thus represents unrestricted and multiple perspectives in the novel. Morrison endows her with a birthmark, startlingly appearing on the eyelid, that calls attention to Sula’s original powers of perception. Sula, indeed, rejects traditional ordering principles as they relate to self and society. She rejects traditional sexual mores as well, ignoring the ‘ownership’ principle of marriage and operating on the principle that sex is non-competitive and non-threatening. Thus, her entire life represents a rejection of traditional notions of feminine ‘responsibility’. Sula refuses to see women as only wives and mothers.

Morrison ultimately offers few answers to her carefully posed conflict between the new and old represented by Sula and Nel respectively. Here the figure of the circle, a frequently used image in the novel, becomes suggestive. Sula swings Chicken Little in circles before letting him fly to make circular ripples in the river. Hannah similarly makes elated circles in her cooking water before going to her death, and in the final line of the novel, Morrison leaves us with the ambivalence of circles:

"Nel's was a fine cry-loud and long-but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow."(174)

Morrison, in *Sula*, thus "carefully refrains from offering a synthesis of her dialectic between the new and the old. She settles instead for a clear presentation of the limitations of both the traditional and the 'new' perpetual modes."¹⁷ As we circle around the dialectical poles presented in *Sula*, Morrison suggests that the final synthesis is yet to be made.

It is, however, to be noted that if the African people's struggle for individual freedom is the primary focus of *Sula*, their racial struggle for national freedom is a secondary focus. Morrison is concerned with issues of national importance that affect blacks as Americans, and with those of local importance that pertain to them as blacks. The culture in which the black man lives is American, but his status as a black prevents his full participation in white American culture. Racial issues are interwoven into the fabric of the novel throughout.

The Bottom, situated high upon the hills, is ironically designated. Metaphysically, the Bottom is black America, whose ironic genesis is revealing of white society's failed promises. The naming of the Bottom denotes White man's lack of sympathy and concern for the survival of blacks. The white farmer's promise of a piece of land to the black man on the top of the hills for executing a difficult task becomes a 'nigger joke' as

"the nigger got the hilly land, where planting was back-breaking, where the soil slid down and washed away the seeds and where the wind lingered all through the winter."(5)

With its curious origin as a "nigger joke", The Bottom presents a version of reality that closely resembles a cyclic repetition of the historical injustices perpetrated upon blacks. The Bottom bears witness to the sociological, psychological and economic plight of the blacks in Medallion. It strikes a parallel to "the lower depths described by Maxim Gorky when discussing the poor and oppressed classes in the nineteenth century Russian society."¹⁸

Morrison proposes, however, that it is the pressures and false values forced upon blacks by white society that hamper the stability of the black family in general and woman in particular. She depicts in the novel the manner in which marriage, for instance, is

regarded by male and female alike under the influence of white culture. Regardless of social or economic standing, all the residents of the Bottom share the common belief that a woman alone is an incomplete being and that she can find respectability and fulfilment only in the role of some man's mate. Tragically, the same women, who are the victims of this system help to perpetuate the system. For example, marriage for Nel constitutes embracing the very same repressive values that have left her bereft of imagination and a distinct sense of self. Because of her upbringing, Nel does not and cannot see anything singular about herself. She recognizes her individuality only when it is mirrored through someone other than herself. By marrying Jude, she dissolves the bond of interdependence she shares with Sula, only to substitute her husband in the place of her friend.

Morrison's characters discover that they escape the black community's socio-economic disorder only to face, later, the all-encompassing psychological chaos characteristic of life in a society polarized along racial lines. Constant racism forms continuity in the cycle of frustration from which the townfolk cannot easily escape. The hostile environment that surrounds the blacks makes them 'helpless scapegoats of subservient acceptance of everything white'. *Sula*, thus, signifies the horrid inevitability of black culture facing cruel distortion against the backdrop of white man's oppression.

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