

## DEPICTION OF BLACK WOMEN AS 'OTHERS' IN TONI MORRISON'S *SULA*

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### **Abstract**

*Black women have always suffered from multiple oppressions for being Black and woman at the same time. They are marginalized and considered as others by the White people. The theory of Black feminism was forged in resistance to this oppression and to call attention to this issue. Black Women strive hard to assert their identity as human beings. This paper is concerned with the depiction of black women as 'others' and their marginalization in the novel, Sula by Toni Morrison. It examines the quality of black women's suffering through racism, and sexism in the American society. According to Morrison the major predicament of black women is, therefore, two-fold- the effect of racism upon black identity formation, and the effect of racism upon the identity formation of the black female. The portrayal of black women as 'others', is enough to justify any kind of oppression. Sula is studied as the basis for this analysis because it depicts the racial oppression and marginalized life of the black women.*

**Keywords:** *others, marginalization, oppression, racism, identity, depiction, black women*

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Toni Morrison is considered to be one of the most popular and most important authors of the 20th Century. She is the first black woman writer who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. She was influenced by the ideologies of women's liberation movements. She is a black feminist author. According to Black feminist theory sexism, class oppression and racism are inextricably bound together. In her writings Morrison frequently reveals the life of black women and stimulates them to love themselves, their race, and their culture and not to become the victim of white superiority or white beauty standards. In her novels she discusses the experiences of the oppressed black minorities in isolated communities. She has actively challenged the stereotypes that have been imposed on black women throughout history. Morrison began writing *Sula* in 1969, a time when African Americans and others were working towards equal civil rights and opportunities. The novel addresses issues of racism and suppression of black people and shows how the dominant white culture disables the healthy development of black women. Morrison illustrates the struggle in black women's life resulting into inequality between the blacks and the whites, as opposed to inequality between men and women. She pictures the harsh conditions of black women, without separating them from the oppressed situation of the whole minority. According to Ghaly, 'Rethinking the traditional perspectives on identity and its relation to culture, [Morrison] eschew binary logic to explore multiple forms and root causes of social marginality.' (21) With this in mind, this paper is concerned with the depiction of Black women as 'others' in Morrison's novel *Sula* (1998). *Sula* is studied as the basis for this analysis, because it depicts the oppression of the black people in different forms, especially black women's marginalized life. The culture of the black community where women make meaning of their everyday experiences becomes a culture of silence and domination from white people. The objective of this paper is to explore the condition of black women in racist and patriarchal African-

American society and how they resist against it to achieve self-awareness and self-empowerment.

Morrison is deeply concerned with issues such as race, gender and sexuality. She knows that the impact of white racism on black communities is undeniable. Yet, she addresses the question of the position of women within black communities, and how the relationships with both men and other women shape their lives. Black women are the victims of double oppression, being Black and woman at the same time. In an interview conducted by Colette Dowling, Morrison states that 'Blacks is they are to succeed in America society, must leave their native communities, and in so doing cut themselves off their old lives.' (Dowling 58) This amounts to double isolation of blacks since the doors to the white American society generally remain closed to blacks. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, gradually, black women realized that their position in the white American society was like animal and they began to fight for its improvement. The New Women appealed to society's sense of their victimization when they demanded compensation in the shape of leg. They wanted to get political power to combat the victimizing forces. These were the fields where the changes were most visible, but there was much more to change. At the beginning of the twentieth century, black women were still considered practically worthless. Black women were at the bottom of the social hierarchy and negative stereotypes were attributed to them. They often had to endure not only the racism inflicted by the white people but also the harsh treatment of their husbands.

While living such degraded life and being surrounded by people with negative attitude, black women could only find support and sympathy among other black women who were in the same situation. As a result of this, friendship played an important role in black women's lives. In *Sula*, Morrison explores the dynamics of the relationship between two women, through the treatment of friendship between Sula Peace and Nel Wright and examines the representation of character as process, not essence. The novel not only narrates the story of how Sula and Nel become friends, but also the implications of the rift that separates them when one chooses a traditional life of marriage

and family and the other chooses independence from traditional expectations for women. Moreover, through her meticulous treatment of place in her depiction of the Bottom, the neighbourhood where Sula and Nel grow up, Morrison illustrates how a black community's identity evolves and shapes itself with its own cultural resources and elaborate social structures. The plight of the black female characters in *Sula* is even worse than that of men. They enjoy the freedom less than men. Nel and Sula at the age of twelve understand the limitations of their status, because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all free demand triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be (Morrison 52). For Sula, the only alternative is to reject the role of motherhood, for only in this ways he can enjoy the same freedom as the men. She confesses without hesitation to her friend Nel that even if she had children he would abandon them to preserve her freedom, 'Then I really would act like what you call a man. Everyman I ever knew left his children. '(Morrison 142). Unlike Nel, who describes independence as acting like a man, Sula feels that free demand caring for one's children are not roles that belong naturally to either men or women. For Nel, who feels she needs to provide for her children, freedom comes much later, when they no longer need her.

Exploring the life of female characters- Eva, Helene, Hannah, Sula and Nel, Morrison investigates the repressive white society's influence on the black community and examines the corruptive forces which compel the members of the black society to reject and alienate their own people. Eva, Hannah and Sula represent economically and sexually independent women who gain strength from each other in the absence of male member. Sula Peace is presented as a domineering female, intending to live her life as a free being. She 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. Here Morrison is interested in the struggle for individual rights, in general, and women's rights in particular, rather than in the rights of African people as a collective. Sula refuses to take any responsibility in the name of marriage and her mother dislikes it. The life of Sula, while growing up in the black community of Medallion in the 1920s, is shaped by her experiences with family and friends. A strong sense of feminine identity is



displayed in this independent young woman and when she returns to Medallion as an adult, treated as an outcast because of her refusal to conform to the anticipated norms found in black society. Sula represents women of the 1960s, when she finds her power not within her community, but in her rebellion against it. Sula's rebellion against her community is a fight which many black women made in the 1960s when they chose not to conform to the traditional roles as daughters, mothers, and wives.

Contrary to Sula, her best friend from childhood Nel Wright assumes the traditional role of wife and mother as an adult and yet, risks losing her own identity in the process. She tends to follow the authority imposed on her by the society and her mother, Helena who is a traditional lady. To Sula, Nel is a personification of 'degenerate aspects of conventional female morality'. Her mother largely shapes this phase of Nel's development. Nel and Sula, though quite different from each other, evolve the friendship. In their quest for wholeness both women find their world rife with contradictions and tensions. They 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.

Morrison's black female characters challenge all the stereo typical negative images which are associated with black women. The strong black women have power to cultivate their own identity but the weak and the most vulnerable among them have internalized oppression. This internalization destroys their ability to respond, to feel and to claim a positive identity. Morrison challenges and destroys the mammy image used by the white to exploit black women. It is widely used for black slave woman in America. She is very faithful, obedient and submissive. This image is created to justify all sort of economic and sexual exploitation of black women. Mammy has no identity. Eva presents a strong challenge to mammy image. She is the most unprivileged black mother who has been left by her husband. Her self-respect does not allow her to beg. She sacrifices her leg in order to support her family.

Eva with the haunting image of one leg depicts what steps a single black woman

can take to save her family. She does not become a mammy but emerges as a strong black woman who protects herself-respect at any cost. (Williams 111)

Her husband called Boy Boy is a womanizer. 'He did whatever he could that he liked, and he liked womanizing best, drinking second, and abusing Eva third.' (Morrison 32) Boy Boy leaves Eva in a very helpless and miserable situation. Eva is a strong black mother who faces every kind of trouble courageously. Through Eva's character Morrison challenges passive and pathetic image of black mother. She stands for all single black mothers who learn to resist and fight back. She learns to live for her children. Williams says that Eva sacrifices her leg but refuses to become a low paid domestic worker in a white family. In this way 'she shatters the mammy stereotype of black women.' (111-113).

Like Eva, Sula also challenges the passive image of black women. Sula is a rebellious independent black woman. She is a non-conformist, daring enough to challenge all the social norms. She dares to transcend or violate all the boundaries. When Sula's friend Nel visits her on death beds he makes her realize her limitation as a woman. She tells her that a woman cannot act like a man; especially a black woman cannot do whatever she likes. She criticizes her acts and says,

You can't do it all. You woman and colored women at that. You can't act like a man. You can't be walking around all independent like, doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don't (Morrison 142).

Sula is an adventurer and a wanderer. She destroys the so-called obedient, passive image of black woman.

Sula is "an outsider, a wanderer, who remains on the periphery of all boundaries." In appreciating Sula, Morrison stresses on the artist's "need to experiment, to think, to do the outrageous." This is an effort to claim an individual voice. Sula does what she likes; she challenges the traditional gender roles and acts "in ways that are associated with men". Sula examines herself, she is experimental with herself, she's perfectly willing to think the unthinkable and soon (Williams 104).

Sula is an artist who rejects the dominant and hegemonic value of her community. She defies the traditional gender roles. She acts and lives like a man. Sula's death shows how difficult and painful it is for a black female artist to dare to live and survive in a racist society.

Her death is emblematic of the many unrecorded deaths of black women, and most importantly, her death is the outcome of an intense frustration that occurs when a female artist does not indeed find an appropriate form for her creativity (Williams 120).

Thus Sula challenges the marginalization and stereotypical representation of black women in fiction. By sabotaging these stereotypes Morrison attempts to rewrite the lost histories of the black American women whose positive images and stories have been eradicated by the dominant culture. Therefore, the focus of *Sula* is the workings and struggle of the internal black society while it simultaneously centres on an in-depth analysis of the marginalized roles of blacks and women within the black community.

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