

TONI MORRISON'S *SULA*: THE SURVIVAL AGAINST SUPPRESSION

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Abstract

Toni Morrison is known for convincing portrayal of misery and suffering of female characters in her novels. Her novels usually foreground the black American experience in the unjust society where not only the canonical parameters of society suffocate them but also the infused psychological makeup make them miserable. In this paper I have taken Morrison's novel Sula to analyze the relationships prevalent among the characters and how it effects their lives. In The Bluest Eye Pecola strives for beauty which causes her destruction and made her an outcast in the society. Her relationship with her mother is quite puzzling because of the lack of love and Sula revolves around Sula Peace and Nel Wright. In this novel like that of Pecola they also face the same treatment from mothers. They struggle in their adulthood and fight against dysfunctional relationship with their mothers. Their strong bond of love helps them to fight against oppression but different attitude towards life set them apart from each other. Both the novels reflect upon how the racial oppression effects the relationship of love and enmity among various characters. This paper will try to show the resistance and survival against the dominant forces in the society.

Key Words: *Oppression, Survival, Female, Ideology, Patriarchy, Resistance.*

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Toni Morrison is a novelist whose work does not yield itself to a singular critical analysis. Her novels reflect upon the pathetic conditions of black people for whom the peace and prosperity is a kind of myth in white dominated society. The relationship among various characters conveys psychological depression as well suppression through which the inner complex could be seen as a kind of barrier to develop a bond with others (within their own community and white community). Morrison's oeuvre is based upon the African American culture: "I think about what black writers do as having a quality of hunger and disturbance that never ends. Classical music satisfies and closes. Jazz always keeps you on the edge. There is no final chord. There may be a long chord, but no final chord. And it agitates you" (155). She sees Lena Home and Aretha Franklin as characteristic in that "they don't give you all, they only give you enough for now. . . . They have the ability to make you want it, and remember the want. That is a part of what I want to put into my books. They will never fully satisfy- never fully" (qtd in Hilfer). She seems to portray in her novels the real picture with a dint of resistance flavor so as to provide a counter attack on the dominant prevalent ideologies. To discuss *Sula* the prominent and striking novel *The Bluest Eye* couldn't be ignored because both the novels are quite similar and *Sula* seems to be progression of the former one.

The Bluest Eye:

This novel is about Breedlove Family in which the little girl Pecola gets ill-treated not only by the society but also by her mother and father. She yearns for the 'blue eyes' and her longing destructs her completely. Her father rapes her and she conceives a child of her own father. She becomes the victim of incest and her mother treats children of the other family very delicately where she works but unfortunately her own daughter remains aloof and unloved by her. In this novel, Morrison has created a parallel character to Pecola who unlike her hates the white doll. Thus, Macteer's the other black family love their children and Claudia wants to decipher the effect and relevance of the norms of beauty. Her stand seems to convey a valid point as how to maintain the black dignity. Morrison through Claudia deconstructs canonical divisions and binary distinctions. "She tries to investigate the cause and effect relation of the socially constructed idealization of beauty, which is quite difficult for her to decipher" (Raja 13).

Pecola's behaviour and her relation to her family is not of enmity or love but a kind of drifting relationship which gets engraved in her mind by suppression and a loss of communication. Macteer family on the other hand supports their children and teaches them to accept blackness and how to resist the outside pressure and humiliation but Pecola contrary to such support prays to God: "Please make me disappear" (*The Bluest Eye* 45). Her desire seems to show that how Morrison wants to demonstrate that by not accepting the blackness as pride and an inevitable reality black people fails to give importance to their own family as well as community. Pecola's yearning is a typical example of self-destruction. Toni Morrison in an interview with Charles Ruas argues that she: "writes about a girl who wanted blue eyes and the horror of having that wish fulfilled; and also about the whole business of what physical beauty and the pain of that yearning and wanting to be somebody else..." (qtd. in Blooms Guide 17).

Thus, the novel offers a critique of the family relations among the black community and the two families in the novel seems to demonstrate how the interference from outside (either physical or emotional) can hamper the growth and stability among the members of a family or community. The resistance and acceptance being inculcated in Macteer family creates a hope and provides a rational counter to the hegemonic canons. The relationship among Breedlove family gets deteriorated like in Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* in which the Igbo society loses its charm and prosperity under the foreign influence. The other important aspect of relationship is that of mother and daughter. In one family it's of congenial type and in case of Pecola, her mother becomes the victim of standard notions of living.

Sula

This novel is like that of *The Bluest Eye* in which relationships are shattered by the outside agency that leads to destruction. The two families of Nel and Sula are contrasted like Macteer and Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*. Nel belongs to the family which believes in social conventions and having rigid and stable atmosphere at home. She was uncertain regarding the conventional notions prevalent at her home and baffles at her grandmother who was the only unconventional woman in her family. Sula on the contrary lives with her mother Hannah and Eva; her grandmother. They are considered loose in society as their house serves as a home to three informally adopted boys.

Sula and Nel despite their differences become attached to each other and by accident Sula playfully swings Chicken Little, a neighbourhood boy who fell into the river when she loses grip. They decided not to tell anybody about it but began to live apart.

Sula being a black girl of low class household at Bottom, provides her limited opportunities and she with Nel from the very young age know that they are “neither white nor male,” “all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them” (52). Hence, they have “set about creating something else to be” (52). Christian mentions the “effect of insularity on the women of the Bottom” because the neighborhood is high up in the hills and so isolated from the rest of the world (50). She also remarks that due to the insularity and vulnerability of the black community, the crucial defining characteristic of “the class of woman is that she make others” by making babies and supporting men. The adult Nel, who has both borne children and made Jude (83), reminds Sula that being “a woman and a colored woman,” she “can’t act like a man” and “can’t be walking around all independent-like” (142). Even Eva, who has traveled outside the neighborhood, accepts the role of women and accuses the anti-conventional Sula, who only wants to “make myself” and of being “selfish” (92). It is worth pointing out that for Sula, life and the fate of being a colored woman in the cities is different from Nel’s conception. She concludes that “All those cities held the same people, working the same mouths, sweating the same sweat,” which bores her (120). Sula tells Nel that every colored woman in their country is “dying” “like a stump” while she is going down like “red woods” (143). Her point gets conveyed in the picture of the colored women she presents that shows the potential trauma victims.

Sula lives a flamboyant life having affairs not only within the community but also with white men which makes her an evil presence in the Bottom. She has an affair with Nel’s husband which results in abandoning of Nel by her husband. So, the relationship between Nel and her husband succumbs to Sula’s flamboyant personality. It reveals how the dominant patriarchal set up exercise the power and will to abandon the weak and miser woman.

Morrison seems to make the point that women imitates what they see and the relationship between mother and daughter plays a crucial role for peace and harmony. Good and evil could be seen as complimenting each other. Hortense Spillers argues:

In the relationship between Nel and Sula, Morrison demonstrates the female’s rites of passage in their peculiar richness and impoverishment; the fabric of paradoxes betrayals and sympathies, silences and aggressions, advances and sudden retreats transmitted from mother to daughter, female to female, by mimetic gesture. (226)

The relationship among the different characters in the novel reflect upon an important thesis that good and bad compliment as well as complete a person. Morrison in case of Helene (Nel’s mother) conveys that she takes recourse to a different path by

abandoning her mother and living her life contrary to her mother; "heavy hair in a bun, dark eyes arched in a perpetual query about other people's manners" (*Sula* 18). By considering her own mother as evil she destroys the part of her personality that expresses any kind of freedom. She saw this as the wrong way to live. But by denying a necessary part of who she is, good and bad, human and flawed, dies in denying completeness. The friendship between Nel and Sula symbolizes the importance of every perspective whether good or bad to attain the completeness. Both the families in one respect or the other lack freedom or discipline which cause dysfunction and falling apart.

The self-destruction that each woman experiences throughout the novel gives Nel the possibility for rebirth. With Sula's death everything falls apart and it symbolizes that without family or community a person remains selfless. Thus, the relationship of love has weak footing in the novel and enmity takes the charge of destruction.

Morrison justifies that identity is not an individual phenomenon but instead created in a community and in its deepest level it develops through intersection, not by separation. The unspeakable essentialist truth of identity is that it evolves even in pain and sorrows. Sula being the typical example of it. Nel confronts herself as she was unable to describe because twenty five years after the death of Sula she tried to justify herself after Eva's charge that "watching" Chicken Little disappear into the water was the same as throwing him in the river. Nel at the end of the novel cries to make herself one with Sula by transcending all barriers, she visits Sula's grave:

"Sula?" she whispered, gazing at the tops of the trees. "Sula?"

Leaves stirred; mud shifted; there was the smell of overripe green things. A soft ball of fur broke and scattered like dandelion spores in the breeze.

"All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude." And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. "We was girls together," she said as though explaining something. "O Lord, Sula," she cried, "girl, girl, girlgirlgirl."

It was a fine cry—loud and long—but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow. (174)

The suppression caused by separation and the "We was girls together" is an explanation of her own loss and trauma. The love for her friend attacks her consciousness as she screams in grief to pent up her emotions. Thus, the unison at the end hints at resistance against the oppression which helps in the survival.

To conclude, the novel seems to show that how the African and American face difficulties in assimilating with the main stream society. The men in Bottom attempts to win respect of the dominant society by yielding to the frustration and their personal relationships with women and children worsens because of such attitude. Ajax, the lone male character who lives his life peacefully because he negates the dominant ideology. Nel forfeits herself to dominant discourse by remaining faithful to her husband, contrary to Sula's life style. Women's friendship is the only relationship in the novel which does not involve the reduction of personalities and the only relationship which supports a healthy growth of characters. Thus, the novel reveals that the bond among women could be a strong weapon of survival for African American women and could help them to resist the oppression.

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