



Toni Morrison's Sula: A Rebellious Pariah

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Abstract

The present analysis compares and contrasts the cultural phenomenon of blacks; gender and racial issues as illustrated by Toni Morrison in her literary works that presents the bitter painful experiences of oppression and exploitation of the black at the hands of the whites. The black women are the worst sufferers as they have to bear the addition burnt of sexual gratification. Sula, the protagonist, suffers not only at the hands of the whites but also at the hand of the people of her own black community. That is why she rejects the traditional role ascribed to women in society. By comparing the two major characters of the novel, the conclusion aim is to establish the particular cultural and social relations between characters specificities and diversity and whether marriage functions similarly in these two different contexts. Considering the socio-economic triggers of black culture, the analysis investigates the characters' racial and cultural inferiority, cultural evolution, struggle for survival and interpreting Sula's decision to become a rebellious pariah.

Key words: blacks, racism, feminist, pariah, family, gender.

Toni Morrison is, perhaps the most formally sophisticated novelist in the history of Afro-American literature, whose work has been described as amazingly high. She astutely describes aspects of the blacks' lives and especially blacks as the people they are. There are many writers who are willing to describe the ugliness of the world as ugly, but the uniqueness of Toni Morrison lies in revealing the beauty and hope beneath the surface of black America. Combining the aims of the Black Freedom Movement and Women's Liberation, she seeks to produce literature which is irrevocably and indisputably black. But the artistic excellence of Morrison's fiction lies in achieving a balance between the writing a truly black literature and writing what is truly universal literature. Although firmly grounded in the cultural heritage and social

concern of black Americans, her work transcends narrowly prescribed conceptions of ethnic literature, exhibiting universal mythic patterns and overtones. To put it in Faulkner's phrase, her novels "grieves on universal bones."

Her themes are often those expected of naturalist fiction-the burden of history, the determining social effects of race, gender, or class, but they are also the great themes of lyrical modernism-love, death, betrayal, and burden of individual responsibility for her or her own fate. Like Golding's, her novels have a fabulist quality as she has been directly influenced by Afro-American folktales. Like George Eliot, she has a rare gift for characterization. She can compel her readers to learn about themselves by experiencing through her characters, states of minds which they would

ordinarily disavow. Morrison's extraordinary distinction as a novelist also lies in restoring the language the black people speak to its original powers.

Morrison concern is not racism, and she does not bother being called 'racist'; but her concern is the oppressive conditions thrust on her protagonist, and the traumatic effect caused by such oppression. As a woman in general and as an Afro-American in particular, Morrison" examines problems of race and gender oppression before exploring class contradictions within the race. In an interview with John O'Brien, Toni Morrison, the Afro-American Nobel Laureate declares:

I am preoccupied with the spiritual survival of whole of my people. But beyond that I am committed to exploring the oppression, the insanities, the loyalties and the triumphs of black women. (1)

Toni Morrison inherited the bitter painful experiences of oppression and exploitation of the black slaves at the hands of the whites. Apart from the bitter memory she inherited as a member of the black community, she had to bear the burden of even more poignant memories as a woman. When one tries to understand racism in America, one comes across the indispensability of sexuality in American racism. Calvin Hernton in his book 'Sexism and Racism in America' rightly emphasizes this particular aspect of American society from the era of slavery to the present:

The sexualization of racism in the United States is the unique phenomenon in the history of mankind. In fact there is sexual involvement, at once real and vicarious, connecting white and black people in America that spans the history of the country from the era of slavery to the present, an involvement so perverse, so ethereal and yet so concrete that all race relations tend to be however subtle, sex relations. (2)

Toni Morrison realized the fact by the time she wrote her second novel *Sula* in 1973, which focuses basically on gender. The concept of gender

with its relations to race and class form an integral part of the novel. The novel can be seen as an attempt to study the black woman's search for identity in white society on the one hand and within her own black community on the other. In this novel, Morrison is interested in the struggle for individual rights in general and women's rights in particular. The Picador edition of *Sula* quotes from *The Times* on the back cover of the novel: "Morrison explores the mythic power of femininity in a poor and isolated rural black community where women rule as mothers, warriors, witches and story tellers."

Nominated for the National Book Award in 1974, *Sula* traces the lives of two black women from childhood to maturity. Nel and Sula are the two main female characters with opposing views about social obligations. If Nel represents the desire to confirm, Sula, the protagonist, represent the desire to rebel.

Because each (Nel and Sula) had discovered years before that they were neither male nor white, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them they had set about creating else to be. (3)

Nel, like her mother, has ironed out all the bitter gloomy memory of her Creole background in order to achieve a tight starched refinement. But, Sula's childhood memories coupled with the collective memories of her community make her a rebel. Her grandmother Eva was abandoned to suffer with her three small children years before by her young husband. She had to set her own son Plum afire in bed rather than witness his drug induced deterioration. Eva's daughter and Sula's mother, Hannah is a beautiful widow who has many lovers mostly her neighbours and the husbands of her friends. She often tells her friends in Sula's presence that she loves Sula but does not like her. Devoid of proper parental care and mooring that a child desperately needs during infancy and early childhood. Consequently, Sula gradually begins to live life her own way.

Nel succumbs to the traditional route of marriage and family, whereas Sula goes to college, travel and sex in a quest to know herself. On her returns to the village years later, she puts her

grandmother Eva in a wretched old folks' home and as for herself, she indulges in casual promiscuity. So much so that she seduces her bosom friend Nel's husband, Jude, and thereby wrecks the marriage. It is quite ironical that Sula, who is the life long and only friend of Nel with whom she had shared hopes and fears, joys and pain and who had loved to see her married with Jude should be responsible for wrecking her marriage.

Sula and Nel develop their intense relationship at the tender age of twelve. Each receives from the other love, security and identity blatantly denied to them in their homes, in their surroundings. Barbara Smith writes that the friendship 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."* (4) They grew together not as two but as one single individual. However with their marriage, Nel chooses the traditional role of a woman whereas Sula goes far away in distancing herself from the norms of family and society. Thus, both of them make choices diametrically opposed to each other. But Nel's marriage does not dissolve their friendship which remains as deep as earlier.

Returning to the village ten years later Nel's marriage, Sula imparts magic on her days. Life is full of joy and glory to all of them as it has resumed as easy and sweet rhythm unless Sula and Jude are discovered naked, one day by Nel in her bedroom, not surprisingly, to supersede their friendship. To add to Nel's distress, Jude leaves the village, Nel and their children. Despite of having distressed the life of Nel, Sula shows no signs of atonement even when facing imminent death. Three years later, when Nel visits dying Sula she asks:

Why don't you love me enough to leave him alone? To let him love me. You had to take him away. (But Sula bounces back :) What you mean take him away? I did not kill him. If we were such good friends, how come you could not get over it? (5)

This episode shows how far have Nel and Sula gone away from each other in their value systems. Not that Sula wants to desert Nel or abrogate her

marriage, what Morrison wants to assert is that Sula has lost faith in any of the traditionally accepted social norms. To quote Diana Gillespie and Missy Dehn Kubitchhak, Sula:

...offers a view of female psychological development that defies traditional male centred interpretation of female development and calls out for an expansion of women centred paradigm. (6)

Rebellious Sula outrightly rejects the traditional role assigned to a woman in the community. In fact, she rejects the behavioural standards of all sorts. Unlike Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*, Sula is motivated by a firm sense of 'Me-ness. She steps out the caste of women, beyond and class definition. Keeping herself outside the sex, race and society, Sula is interested neither in looking beautiful nor bearing a child. By appropriating male prerogatives, she, in fact, abandons her sex and becomes a perversion of the passive role specially assigned to a woman. She turns down the advice of settling down and having babies: *"I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself"*. (7) She defies all authority and controls and becomes a rebellious pariah. Morrison offers her as one of the lawless individuals. She is enigmatic and defiant living in her own world of fantasies, creating her own realities and setting her own objectives.

Sula suffers not only at the hands of the whites but also at the hand of the people of her own black community. Eventually, she becomes a rebellious pariah. Her rebellious nature makes her popular and she is unforgivable in the opinion of the people of Medallion, and Sula becomes an outcast and untouchable. She knows that people despise her and knows that they frame their hatred as disgust for her promiscuity. She rejects those lovers who regard sex as healthy or beautiful. She rejects the traditional notions of family eschewing marriage babies and grandparental care. She refuses to see women as only wives and mothers. Morrison, through the character of Sula, expresses her deep disgust for the oppression and exploitation of women in general and black women in particular. The extreme reaction of Sula clearly portrays the seething mind of a black woman which may react

and create havoc any moment if the system did not change itself. Sula remains independents till she breaths her last: *“Then she realized or sensed that there was not going to be any pain. She was not breathing because she didn’t have to. Her body did not need oxygen. She was dead.”*

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