

**Toni Morrison's *Sula*: Construction of Identity in Terms of Relationships  
With Others and With Oneself.**

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**ABSTRACT:** *The construction of identity – formation remains a central concern in Morrison's Sula that describes the parents-child relationship and peer relationships, both are controlled by cultural constrictions. Morrison considers in her second novel Sula a two fold predicament- the effect of racism upon black identity formation and the effect of racism and sexism upon the identity formation of female. Sula, the central figure of the novel, suffers at hands of whites and blacks and rejects the traditional norms ascribed to women in society. Morrison has created two female characters – Nel and Sula – none is complete in herself. Nel and Sula seek comfort in each other's company and develop a strong bond out of the awareness that their lives are restricted by their community and by the outer society. Sula's seduction of Jude makes Nel's marriage destroyed. The principal aim of writing this novel is to show the damaging effect of disparity and false white values forced upon the stability of black families in general and women in particular.*

**Key Words:** *Construction, Identity, Relationship, Racism, Sexism, Disparity.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

A Nobel Laureate and creative writer Toni Morrison have achieved the impossible by becoming the first African- American to win the Nobel Prize in literature in 1993. Her contributions have become the power of African American literature through both her fiction and critical essays. Her fictions are based on the various themes of problems faced by African American women. They give clear picture of black life, society and culture. Morrison's works present social issues like racism, class exploitations, and sexism. She writes; "If anything I do, in the way of writing novels, (or whatever I write) isn't about the village or the community or about you. Then it is not about anything." (Irfan 10)

The quest for identity or the process of identity – formation remains a central concern in Morrison's novels. This novel describes the parents-child relationship and peer relationships, both are controlled by cultural constrictions.

Toni Morrison's *Sula* deals the relationships of Sula with others and with herself that influenced her identity formation. In Morrison's fiction identity is always temporary as her female

characters faces three types of oppression – Whiteness, maleness, and bourgeois culture – search desperately for their genuine selves. It is interesting to see that while a body is despised as “ugly” due to its inability to satisfy men, the same body becomes an object of desire when it reaches adulthood because an adult black woman is seen in terms of her sexuality.

Toni Morrison considers in her second novel *Sula* a two fold predicament- the effect of racism upon black identity formation and the effect of racism and sexism upon the identity formation of female. In an interview conducted by Colette Dowling, Morrison suggests that “blacks, if they are to succeed in American society, must leave their native community, and in so doing, cut themselves off from their old lives.” (Dowling 58)

Morrison’s focus in *Sula* is on woman as an individual. Sula, the central figure of the novel, suffers at hands of whites and blacks. She rejects the traditional norms ascribed to women in society. In *Sula* Morrison is interested to show the individuality of an African-American woman, struggling for identity.

### DETAILED ANALYSIS

*Sula* is basically a woman’s novel, struggling towards freedom and selfhood. The male characters play no major roles. They are “superficial, immature, untrustworthy, and anonymous, as is suggested by their names – Jude (Judas), Green (naive), Boy-Boy (infantile), Chicken Little (fearful and diminutive), the Deweys (anonymous).” (Samuels and Hudson 46)

Morrison’s manner of exploring the nature of woman’s exploitation is unique. She has created two female characters – Nel and Sula – none is complete in herself. The idea that Nel and Sula represent two halves of one person reverberates throughout the entire novel. When Sula gets back to the 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”. Morrison’s comment is too significant: “their friendship was so close; they themselves had difficulty distinguishing one’s thoughts from the other’s”. ( *Sula* 83) Nel and Sula then are separate faces of one being. Morrison recommends 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.” (Banyiwa 28)

For Nel and Sula the problem of losing their identity is a direct outcome of the Bottom’s limiting definition of women as subservient self-sacrificing being. Nel takes the traditional role the community prescribes and maintains her social identity, although her personal identity is non-existent. Sula comparatively is a free – spirited woman whose tenaciousness to prove her worth places her at odds with the culturally rich black community. In their quests for wholeness both girls 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”. (Montgomery 132)

Morrison’s most high- powered and eloquent statement regarding the degradation of the female comes in a paragraph that appears after the first encounter of Nel and Sula: “Because each had discovered years before they were neither white nor male and all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them they had set about creating something else to be”. ( *Sula* 52)

The dilemma of the novel and its solution are found within this statement. Black women are oppressed, and in order to escape they should become self-propagators. Sula disallows the traditional role given to women by the society. However her exploitation as a woman is the result of an oppressive economic system, not men. Sula finds it’s tough to escape all the traditionalisms associated with women.

As a contemporary novel about female bonding, *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 woman-centered paradigm”. (Gillespie and Kubitschek 137)

Morrison’s novel *Sula* is a deep study of friendship between two black girls, Nel Wright and Sula Peace, who face the tremendous contradictions of life. Their broken and scattered lives reveal the depth of their agony, which is the outcome of their loss of identity at the cultural, gender, and racial planes: “Their broken friendship is a measure of their broken lives that are cramped from the very start. As counterpoints all the other women in this book (*Sula*) must either fit themselves into the place of life has set for them or defy it with tragic circumstances proportionate to their degree of non-accommodation. (Christian 27-28)

Nel and Sula seek comfort in each other’s company for they share the common link of being young, black and female in a world that is commonly geared to meet the designs of white men. Despite having different background both are close friends because “they found in each other’s eyes the intimacy they were looking for”. (*Sula* 52)

Their intense friendship develops at the age of twelve. Each girls gets from the other security, love and identity blatantly denied to them in their homes. Barbara Smith writes that their friendship is “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”. (Barbara 168) Sula and Nel discover boys and together they become aware of their own sexuality. Naturally, Nel identifies Sula as her alter-ego. In the words of Naana Banyiwá Horne, “Sula is to Nel as Mr. Hyde is to Dr. Jekyll in Robet Louis Stevenson’s classic novella, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde”.(Banyiwá 30)

Nel and Sula are the two sides of the coin. Both are Morrison's favourite characters since they are symbolic of the good and the evil persistently present in the society. "Yet she(Sula) are very much alike. They compliment each other. 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' hand". (Parker 253)

Nel and Sula develop a strong bond out of the awareness that their lives are restricted by their community and by the outer society. Although they share strong bond, they are different from each other. Sula is passionate and Nel is traditionalist. Nel accepts slavery to racism and Sula turns into a liberated woman. Sula denies the traditional role of a woman. She refuses the sex, race and class definitions of the society

The families of Nel and Sula contrast with each other. Nel's mother, Helene, controls herself against racial humiliation. She is a conventional mother, while Sula's mother, Hannah, is hardly aware of her only daughter's need. In this way Nel and Sula feel isolated from their own mothers.

Nel gets married to Jude and devotes her life to Jude and her three children. Sula's seduction of Jude makes Nel's marriage destroyed. Nel knows that she will have no other man. Sula continuously uses black and white men until she is deserted by the man she loves. Nel and Sula live in a world where women survive without men.

Nel and Sula learn bitter and painful lessons from life. Nel never wants freedom, she always wishes for a life of conformity. Sula loves freedom, and lives according to her own dictates. When she heard her mother saying that she does not love Sula, created a sense of indifference in her. After this she stopped feeling for others. Sula becomes so much inhumane that the burning scene of her mother could not move her. The quality of sacrificial love of her grandmother is not apparent in Sula. Furthermore Sula betrays Nel by seducing her husband, Jude.

Nel and Sula totally vary from each other in their attitudes to society. Nel follows the traditions of the society, while Sula rejects them. Sula is a very daring character who feels that men are simply to be used and discarded. After the death of her father, Rekus, her mother refuses to marry again and become a seducer. She takes a number of lovers, mostly the spouses of her friends and neighbors. Sula is like her mother. She shocks the whole community with her manners. She does not accept the rules that reflect the community's traditional values. She rejects the advice of getting married and having babies. She replies, "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself." (Sula 92)

The daring action of Sula makes her a recluse and alienates from her only friend, Nel. In order to search her true self, Sula leaves Medallion for a decade but she is a failure in her mission. Sula

loves Ajax and learns the pleasure of companionship. She starts to make herself physically beautiful. After knowing this Ajax deserts her. Wade Gayles remarks: “(Sula) has finally internalized the assumptions about women’s role and behavior in relationship with men and she has ended her journey toward selfhood” (qtd. In Ray 93)

Sula is presented as a very daring and adventurous character, which openly challenges the limitations imposed on her individuality and breaks all links of blood and human relationships in her quest for self. “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 strifle the self.” (Horne 31)

Sula’s rebelliousness appears itself in several ways. Sula encourages Nel to be aware of her rights and freedom. Sula wages against the widespread disparity, oppression and exploitation of society. She feels no pressure to please any one. Sula is more rebellious than other Morrison’s characters. As she admits to Nel: “I got my mind. And what goes on in it.”(Sula 43) Thus Sula is not like Pecola, she lives according to her own realities, and gets her own personal objectives.

Sula’s family is responsible for her rebellious, daring nature. She gets bravery from her grandmother, Eva peace who when deserted by her husband does not sit back and mourn, rather stands up to survive. Eva leaves her children in the hands of her neighbor, when the hunger and starvation became painful. She comes back with sufficient money to take care of her children but without a leg. People talk that Eva deliberately placed her leg on the railway track to claim the insurance money.

Moreover Morrison is successful in her use of Sula’s rebelliousness; she describes the impact of racism and sexism on Sula’s defiance but she is less convincing in her depiction. But a serious reading of the novel shows that Morrison’s stress is on sexism.

Morrison presents in *Sula* the struggle for individual and racial freedom. Morrison is concerned with issues of local and national importance that affects blacks. Blacks fight to lead a respectable and honorable life. Racial issues can be seen in the novel. The history of the Bottom with its roots in Slavery and the lack of development of the Deweys are examples of racism. The story of the Bottom denotes white man’s lack of sympathy and concern for the survival of blacks. “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.”(Sula 5)

Another example of racial discrimination in the novel is connected with Helene Wright, who is said to be “the epitome of ideal womanhood.” (Heinze 80) When Nel is going to New Orleans with her mother to attend her grandmother’s funeral, she finds that she is subhuman in the eyes of whites. When the train conductor publicly humiliates her, instead of showing any reaction her mother gives an artificial smile, as if nothing has happened: “Smile(s) dazzlingly and

coquettishly at the salmon-colored face of the conductor.”(Sula 21) By this action Helene covers her racial insult and oppression. Sula has accepted white values; she finds that she continues to be badly treated at the hands of the white people.

The pain of humiliation of this incident gives a deep imprint on Nel’s mind and she starts searching her identity: “I’m me. I’m not their daughter. I’m not Nel, I’m me. Me.” (p.28) After this effect Nel cultivates a close relationship with Sula despite the objection of her mother. Like *The Bluest Eye*, Sula explores the issues of gender, race and class, the focus being on sexism. Sula starts where *The Bluest Eye* ends. In *The Bluest Eye*, the focus is on racism where in Sula, the focus is on sexism. Pecola and Sula are similar at one point. Both searches for self-identity, not group identity. This selfish quest for self-identity makes Pecola mad and Sula, a recluse and pariah. At the end of the novel Pecola mentally dies while Sula physically dies.

## CONCLUSION

The principal aim of writing this novel is to show the damaging effect of disparity and false white values forced upon the stability of black families in general and women in particular. She describes the manner in which marriage is regarded by male and female alike under the influence of white culture. All the citizen of the Bottom shares the common belief that a woman is incomplete and powerless without a man. She can find respectability and fulfillment only in the role of man’s mate. For example Nel believes in marriage and the same repressive values that have left her bereft of imagination and a distinct sense of self. Nel cannot see anything singular about herself. By marrying Jude, Nel dissolves herself and in this way distorts her own selfhood. Nel dissolves the strong and priceless bond of love and interdependence; she shares with Sula, who always helps and encourages having self – confidence. She regrets: “All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude.” And the loss passed 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.”(Sula 174) At the end of the novel Nel admits that without Sula she is nothing, the loss of Sula is irreparable.

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