

## Toni Morrison's Feminism: A Comparative study of the Characters of Sula and Nel in SULA

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### Abstract

The present paper attempts to examine and explore Morrison's concept of feminism in relation to Sula and Nel, female protagonists of her second novel, *Sula* which appeared in 1973. Morrison, in her work, has explored the experiences and roles of black women in a racist and male dominated society. Her heroines are striving to have an identity which is denied to them because of being black and women. Traditionally, women's lives have been organized and manipulated by patriarchy in all ages and all cultures. It is uniformly believed that motherhood and wifehood are the dual crowns of womanhood. And if a woman chooses to define herself other than a wife and mother, she is condemned as reactionaries to destabilize society. Morrison has beautifully depicted these women rebels. But at the same time, she criticizes the feminist doctrine of unconditioned freedom. For Morrison, feminism does not mean being emotionless as she believes that we need boundaries to have order in a disordered world. What Morrison suggests is to strike a balance between self knowledge and narcissism.

**Key Words:** Feminism, Self- knowledge, Absolute freedom

The novel, *Sula* traces the lives of two black women friends- Sula and Nel from their childhood to maturity and to death. The novel is based on the friendship of these two black girls- their growing up together in a small Ohio town, their sharply divergent paths of womanhood, their ultimate confrontation and reconciliation. Sula and Nel are childhood friends. They have radically different personalities as Nel is quiet and unassuming while Sula is spontaneous and aggressive. Together the girls seem to form two halves of a whole person. Meanwhile the families of the children are contrasted. Nel is the product of a family that lives deeply in social conventions; hers is a stable home, though some might characterizes it as rigid. Sula's family is very different; she lives with her grandmother, Eva and her mother, Hannah, both of whom are seen by the town as eccentric and loose. Sula's household is vibrant, active, and subject to constant change. Despite their differences, Sula and Nel become fiercely attached to each other. It is their loneliness which brings them together and they begin to find satisfaction in each other's company. They get in each other the love and security which they lack in their own

families. As the girls grow up, Nel chooses to marry and settles into the conventional role of wife and mother. Sula follows a wildly divergent path and lives a life of fierce independence and total disregard for social conventions. Shortly after Nel's wedding, Sula leaves the Bottom for a period of ten years. She has many affairs, some with white men. However she finds the people following the same boring routine elsewhere, so she returns to the Bottom and to Nel. Upon her return the town regards Sula as the very personification of evil for her blatant disregard of social conventions. Their hatred in part rests upon Sula's interracial relationships but is actually crystallized when Sula has an affair with Nel's husband, Jude, who subsequently abandons Nel. It makes Nel to break off her friendship with Sula. It is just before Sula dies in 1940 that they achieve a half hearted reconciliation.

On the one hand we are having Sula, a free spirit, who is considered a threat against the community as she chooses to define herself against the conventional life of her Black Bottom community which defines women in terms of daughter, wife and mother. She refuses to accept the traditional role of a woman as she responds defensively: *"I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself"*. (Sula, 42) On the other hand, there is Nel who is utterly contained by the Bottom's sensibility. As an adult she is married, has three children and *"believes in all the laws of that community. She is the community. She believes in its values. Sula does not believe in any of those laws and breaks them all"*. (qtd. in Stepto 14) To Sula, being a wife and mother are not pre-requisites for selfhood. Both women must suffer the consequences of their choices. Nel, by completely succumbing to conventional community life, loses her individuality. Her marriage gives her only social identity. And it is because of this that the loss of her husband, Jude proves to be the loss of identity and the loss of life for Nel. Sula too in her pursuit of absolute freedom gets lost in that freedom. She does not like the idea of imposing upon herself any kind of limitation set by her family or her community, nor does she put any limit upon herself by her own self. Without having any boundary or order in her life, Sula gets lost in the chaotic world.

From childhood, Sula is radical as is evident from a childhood incident. Threatened by some boys on her way to home from school, Sula takes a knife and cut the tip of her finger, frightening the boys by saying *"if I can do that to myself, what you suppose I'll do to you"?*(Sula pp 53-54) She is guided by a firm sense of me-ness. Whatever she is, it is a matter of her own choice: *"Girl, I got my mind. And what goes in it. Which is to say, I got me"*. (Sula 143) Sula chooses to stand outside the community, to define herself as in revolt against it. In some ways Sula is the most radical of the characters of the 1970s fiction as she overturns the definition of good and evil in relation to women by insisting that she exists primarily as and for herself- not to be a mother or to the beloved of men. She does not amuse or accommodate anyone:

*She lived out her days exploring her own thoughts and emotions giving them full reign feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her. As willing to feel pain as to give pain. As willing to feel pain as to give pain, to feel pleasure as to give pleasure, hers was an experimental life.* (Sula 118)

Two incidents in the novel figure prominently in Sula's development. The first, a conversation in which she overhears her mother, Hannah saying, "I love Sula. I just don't like her" (Sula 57) and the second her inadvertent participation in the drowning of one of her peers, a young named Chicken Little:

*The first experience taught her that there was no other that you could count on; the second that there was no self to count on either. She had no center, no speck around which to grow...She completely free of ambition, with no affection for money, property or things, no greed, no desire to command attention or compliments- no ego. For that reason she felt no compulsion to verify herself- be consistent with herself. (Sula 119)*

When Nel goes to see the seriously ill Sula, they talk about the topic of morality and obligation. Sula denies Nel's assertion that black woman cannot afford to be alone and independent. She declares that every woman she knows is slowly dying. While they are dying like stumps, she is "going down like one of those redwoods". (Sula 143) It is her firm sense of me-ness which derives Sula to make following confession to Nel:

*My lonely is mine. Now your lonely is somebody else's. Made by Somebody else and handed to you. Ain't that something? A secondary lonely. (Sula 143)*

Nel blames Sula entirely for the end of her marriage with Jude. Sula does not deny her action but refuses to accept total responsibility as she slept with Jude but it is Jude who chose to abandon Nel. Sula's bedding with Jude may generate the morality driven query: How could she do that to her best friend? But it is a wrong question as it assumes a moral universe in which Sula does not trade. Sula reflects on her life without regret. She believes that so much of the emotions that people display, is just something to occupy their time. People attach moral meaning to their feelings and their action to give a special significance. She marvels and pities that Nel would view her entirely in view of affair with Jude and she is more concerned with the affair than their close wonderful friendship.

Sula is liberated from her female role and assumes responsibility for her life. To Sula being a wife and a mother are not pre-requisite of selfhood. Her own business- the business of being, of living is not dictated by family or community. She listens to her inner voice and does not become a victim to social conformity. Her views on sex project her as a modern woman. For her woman is not just a medium of sexual gratification for man. Sex should be based on mutual understanding of man and woman both. Sula's relationship with Ajax is based on this principle as he "was interested in her. He treated her as a whole person, not as an extension of himself, not as a vessel, not as a symbol". (Henry Louise 385)

From her mother; Hannah, Sula learns that sex "was pleasant and frequent but unremarkable". (Sula 122) Sexual aesthetics bored her. Sex is unremarkable unlike her remarkable friendship with Nel. That is why, years later after her bedding with Jude, she is

unable to see the wrong she has committed and ask her if they were such good friends why she is not able to get over the fact after all she has not killed Jude. Her physical relationship with Jude “reveals how heterosexual nuclear family life stifles woman’s aspirations”. (Manmohan k Bhatnagar 316)

Sula died at the age of thirty. But her revelation about death shows the wisdom of sixty. Normally death inspires fear and horror, but for Sula, death is not at all frightening. She does not regret dying because she feels that she has “*sung all the songs there are*”. (Sula 137) In the last moment of her life sula is confident that she will be loved and remembered by the people of community whose values she has discarded. She confidently asserts “*they’ll love me all right. It will take time, but they’ll love me*”. (Sula 145) Through her death she asserts the possibility of ideal affirmative condition of reciprocal recognition and the recovery of alienated and subordinate self.

But the perspective, Morrison gives us upon this black woman is not pure woman liberation. One cannot approve the freedom that allows Sula to steal Nel’s husband and condemns her childhood friend to a ruined life. It cannot be called freedom but selfishness. Besides the freedom that Sula achieves is as much a prison as it is liberation. Totally free, She becomes obsessed with herself, unable to love, uncontained by the normal rules and boundaries that are associated with human beings.

Unlike Sula, Nel is brought up in well ordered but repressive household. Thus she has to choose the directions of her life with very limited options. Nel succumbs to the code of society and becomes wife and mother through her marriage to Jude Green. Sula’s unconventional standards make Sula to bed Nel’s husband, Jude. This act of Sula serves to ruin her married life. Her shattered marriage makes Nel to lose her identity as “the loss of Jude is the loss identity and the loss of life... She (Nel) now becomes a woman without a man and unable to raise her eyes”. (Keith Byerman p.198) It also destroys her friendship with Sula – the most meaning experience she has ever known.

Thus Nel chooses to define the boundaries of her own identity by choosing to marry as her mother had. Nel basically fulfills Helene’s expectations by getting married rather than fulfilling her own original plan to live a wonderful and exciting life on her own terms. As a result of his extramarital tryst, Jude abandons his family. Nel is devastated by the betrayal of her husband and her friend. Her devastation is partly due to her weak sense of self. She did everything that social conventions demanded but she was still abandoned by husband.

Nel always sees herself as the betrayed party and Sula as the traitor. She was not able to see that after all it was Jude also who chose to take part in the affair, and it was he who chose to leave his family. Like the community, she is blind to the blame that Jude bears. In her trip to Sula’s grave, Nel acknowledges her regret for the course of her life. When she cries out Sula’s

name, she is finally able to admit her feelings of love towards Sula and, therefore, is able to mourn her loss. And in grieving for Sula, in letting herself once more see the positive in Sula, Nel is able to mourn for herself, for the sacrifices she made to gain social acceptance. Both Sula and Nel are incomplete as Morrison herself has noted that each character lacks what the other has:

*Nel...doesn't know about herself. Even at the end, she doesn't know. She is just beginning...Sula on the other hand, knows all there is know about herself because she examines herself...but she has trouble making a connection with other people and just feeling that lovely sense of accomplishment of being close in a very strong way. (qtd. in Stepto 14)*

What Morrison advocates through the lives of Sula and Nel is that Nel must have some of Sula's independence of mind and willingness to take risks instead of plunging into conventional family life, with all its sexist overtones. As she believes that *"living totally by the law and surrendering completely to it without questioning anything sometimes makes it impossible to know anything about yourself"*. (qtd. in Stepto 14) Yet one cannot approve the freedom that allows Sula to steal Nel's husband and condemns her childhood friend to a ruined life. It is not freedom but selfishness. Sula lives according her own design and for that independence, dies early and alone on the second floor of an empty house. Nel survives, but it is only on the final page the novel that she begins to understand that it is Sula, and not Jude, who she has been missing for decades. Nel should have known herself better; Sula should not have known herself quite so well. Sula must have some of the conventionality of Nel's life and Nel must have some of the independence of Sula so that a perfect whole can be created.

Woman to Morrison *"is a creative force and not a burden of continuity"* (Manmohan k Bhatnagar 313) and what she demands from women is not to blindly accept the roles that society has designed for them. She has created an array of self-actualized women who believe in the principle of 'to seek, to strive, but not to yield'. She is not satisfied with traditional role of a woman as just being wife and mother which hardly allows her any space for breathing and having her individual identity. Nel has to repent for her choice as she was totally dependent on her marriage and cannot imagine her existence beyond this social identity of wife and mother. But at the same time Morrison does not approve the feminist principle of absolute freedom as she believes that in order to live in this haphazard world we need to create boundaries and exercise some of the restrictions upon us. Therefore a balance between self-knowledge and narcissism is desirable for a better life.

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