

RACIAL ISSUES IN AMERICA: CONFLICTING IDEAS OF
BLACK WOMEN'S ROLE IN TONI MORRISON'S *SULA*

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ABSTRACT

Morrison's *Sula* explores the contradictory ideas of two black women Sula and Nel. Starting as friends, they both share their emotional and psychological secrets in medallion. Sula and Nel enjoy their life style in separation, and continues their journey till reaching their adulthood. Though they are separated in race and culture, they are united in an unending relationship of friendship. The past life of them, which are similar bring them to the better understanding of their lives.

Nel and Sula come from different families, encounter various problems and their friendship become the major theme of the novel, *Sula*. Nel's mother Helene Wright, tries to rebuild the memorable images of the family. She proves to be the kind of women who always care for their household and children as every other stereotyped female community. Morrison says "Her daughter was more comfort and purpose that she had ever hoped to find in this life. She rose grandly to the occasion of motherhood ... grateful (18)".

Helen Wright teaches her daughter to provide her a comfortable life. The fear of her mother's prostitution compels her to behave as strict as possible to provide the best to her daughter. As characterized in the novel, "Under Helen's hand the girl became obedient and polite. Any enthusiasm that little Nel showed were calmed by the mother until she drove her daughter's imagination underground" (Morrison 18). Her mother's inability to provide her motherly care motivates her to behave well with her daughter.

Sula's mother Hannah Peace, a prostitute, explores the beauty of sex and sleeps with many men and never cares for any woman's behaviour and feelings, and never had friendship in the mansion. Hannah

exasperated the women in the town – “the ‘good’ women, who said, “one thing I can’t stand is a nasty woams” : the whore , who were hard put to find trade among black men anyway and who resented Hannah’s generosity: the muddling women, who had both husbands and affairs, because Hannah seemed too unlike them, having no passion attached to her relationship and being wholly incapable of jealousy (Morrison 44)”.

Hannah’s behavior makes Sula to adopt possessiveness toward men. After she envisions her mother who is lying in a man’s arm propels her to brute over the thought and then on she prefers men than women to be friendly. The condition of the family history affects the minds of Sula and Nel, and they grow apart. Sula moves to a big city, outside Medallion, whereas Nel marries and stays all her life in Medallion. When Sula stays outside the Medallion, she like to adopt to modernity which allows to have sexual liberties. These bring a great impact on shaping her personality. After returning to Medallion, Sula simply denies the values of Medallion and sleeps with her friends husband, quarrels with her grandmother and leavers her in a nursing home. She also attends the church supper without wearing proper bottom, and sleeps with white men too (Denard). Her activities made the people in Medallion to call her a pariah, and outcast her by not accepting as a member of their society, “She (Sula) was a pariah, then and knew it. Knew that they despised her and believed that they framed their hatred as disgust for the easy way she lay with men. Which was true (Morrison 122)”.

As Sula travelled to several places and has been influenced by other social factors, she is initiated with the idea of her new venture without the concept of marriage and feels there is something new in her adventure and denies marrying. She tends to hate love towards men after her constant relationship with many men. She feels that her adventure of love after sleeping with many men gradually discard one by one as: “and the fury she created in the women of the town was incredible – for she would lay their husbands once and then no more. Hannah had been a nuisance, but she was complimenting the women, in a way, by wanting their husbands. Sula was trying them out and discarding them without any excuse the men could swallow. So the women, to justify their own judgment, cherished their men more, soothed the pride and vanity Sula had bruised (Morrison 115)”. And McDowell observes why Sula discards men and states that : “sexually desiring subject rather than as object of male desire(82)” and continuous the rejection of the myth which shows her dispute with her friend Nel.

As Nel loves Jude, she does not accept Sula’s ideas of men’s inferior dignity. Nel could not stand for Sula’s concept because after taking away Jude from her side, Sula reveals that “after marriage she freezes into her wifely role, becoming one of the women who had folded themselves into starched coffins” (McDowell 82). According to Sula, Nel has lost her identity after marrcag and crippled into the role of wife,

mother and making herself the life a boring one. Nel's explanation of self is based on her community's moral values. So she denies what Sula says (Morrison 82). But McDowell Deborah states that Nel's sexual desire is expressed for the pleasure of her husband and not for her own pleasure. She obeys the communities' values and ethical system. Nel's sexuality is enacted within sanctioned place for women-marriage and family. Nel could not imagine sex without Jude.

Sula denies the social ethics and values –“female sexuality and conventions of duty (Morrison 82):. She does not have ego in her sexual intercourse and have no feeling of compulsion of consistent with herself (Morrison 119). She needs to fulfill her desire and she can walk out any men's life. “she went to bed with men as frequently as she could (Morrison 122), and assume herself for her pleasure and own satisfaction.

The argument between Nel and Sula is obviously shows that Nel follows her own values and principles about how to live in their community, and in Medallion, where she never leaves that place for all her life. Being a black woman she cannot resist against racism and sexism as it is against the norms of the patriarchal society. she learnt this from one of her mother's experiences. Once when her mother started a journey in a train to see her grandmother who was sick, the dreadful look of the soldiers and the ill-treatment of the conductor, she recounts:

She [Nel] saw the muscles of their faces tighten, a movement under the skin from blood marble. She felt both pleased and ashamed to sense that these men, unlike her father, who worshiped his graceful, beautiful wife, were bubbling with a hatred for her mother that had not been there in the beginning. It was on that train, shuffling towards Cincinnati, that she resolved to be on guard-always. She wanted to make certain that no man ever looked at her that way. That no midnight eyes or marbled flesh would ever accost her turned her into jelly (Morrison 21-22)”.

Such prevailing conditions in the society keep Nel from resisting social norms. Nel takes up resolution then on that she will never let other men into her life except her husband. She thinks that it is too dangerous to stay outside from her home and finds medallion is the place of protection. As a black woman she feels that it is better to be in a group with other women to overcome the atrocities of sexism and racism. Therefore she never leaves Medallion throughout her life: “the many experiences of her crowded in on her. It was the last as well as the first time she ever to leave Medallion (Morrison 29).

Women believe that the marital life is to provide her with man's guidance and love. Many women including Nel cannot live without this sort of relationship with a man. Therefore Nel wishes to have a

peaceful marital life which is organized by her patriarchal society. Ruth points out that: “society places higher premium on men, male activities, production in the factories and waged labour than on women, female activities, reproduction in the home, and domestic or wage less labour (244).

This view resisted by Sula and in her own opinion Nel wants to stay with her and allow her husband to share her sexual desire, because they both are friends. Friendship among woman, according to Morrison is probably the only currencies of their lives (Essence 275). The ten years of separation from Sula are meant nothing to Nel, but the relationship of Sula as prostitute with her husband Jude separates them permanently. Not only Nel but all the women in Medallion blame Sula for what she has done. Sula feels that all the women in Medallion have false friendship, which is never based on the truth and she could never join with them (Morrison 121). Even though women from a group in Medallion compete with each other to seek approval from others that they are the best in the society, and at the same time they dislike each other's weakness and strength in which Sula does not expect Nel to belong that category.

Women in a patriarchal society forget their sisterly relationship, and try to compete with each other to win men's attention. Though both Sula and Nel behave like sisters, their attachment and attitude towards men constantly compels them to prove that women can never have peaceful relationship until they are not in concern with men. Her perception is that women can live alone, women can take care of themselves without men. If a woman marries, she drags into the world of enslavement – to fulfill their children's need as well as husbands'. Even though women want to take care of themselves it is also for the sake of men, to please them and satisfy their desires. So, Sula's inner faith cannot be accepted in the society, and uplifts a position of pariah. Morrison clearly depicts the importance on Sula's goodness with sociometric “good works”. Morrison put forward that Sula's rejection of social norms leads for the title of her personality virtue which violate by the incomprehension of Nel and Black community. Finally, when Sula lies in the deathbed, Nel compromises and helps her and confess that she is need of friendship than that of Jude's relationship. She misses her a lot because Sula Dies. Nel's grief upon the defeat of Sula's amity of sisterhood with her is employed by Morrison to be the evidence for “women's relationships with each other are more important and certainly more enduring than relationship with men who restlessly drift in and out (Mckay 90-102).

The exposition of female friendship amidst the racial conflicts are proven through the depiction of Nel and Sula by Toni Morrison. This friendship highlights that the black women to attain freedom from all the tortures, which are found in the male-female relationship.

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