

Tensional Bonding in Toni Morrison's *Sula*

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ABSTRACT:

Female bonding is necessary in a society because a woman is not given the equal position as a man in the society. In the society a person has to face many problems. Some problems can be solved easily but some problems can never be removed from one's mind. The problem for the female members in the society is greater if the woman is a Black person. The woman has to face discrimination in the society. They have to face gender discrimination since they are women and also they have to face racial discrimination because they are black people. And in such situations bonding among women in the society can help them to improve their way of living to some extent. Bonding among women cannot be smooth always. Some bonding can be said as tensional. And in this paper the type of bonding will be discussed which we can describe as tensional.

KEYWORDS: Female bonding, tensional bonding, racism, friendship.

INTRODUCTION:

Toni Morrison who is a Nobel Laureate can be considered as one of the foremost of the twentieth century African-American women novelists whose works have impressed the common readers. Morrison's works are mainly about her examination of black experiences within the Black community. She was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. She was awarded the Pulitzer Prize and the American Book Award in 1988 for her novel *Beloved*. A few works of Morrison's works include *Song of Solomon*, *The Bluest Eye*, *Jazz* and many more. Morrison's *Sula* portrays the kind of female bonding which cannot be exactly said as peaceful or loving. The bonding between the women in this novel is a kind of tensional bond. Here Morrison portrays the friendship of Sula and Nel. In the beginning their friendship is seen as a strong bond where there is no chance of separation. But as the two girls grow up changes can be seen in their friendship. Not only the bonding between Sula and Nel but also the mother-daughter relationship can also be seen as a tensional bonding.

TENSIONAL BONDING:

Sula describes the lives of the people in a place called the Bottom. It stood in the hills above the valley town of Medallion, Ohio. The people in the society experienced discrimination regarding race, class etc. in the society. The story is mainly about the friendship between Nel Wright and Sula Peace who can be said as the new generation of the families of the Wrights and the Peaces. The Wrights are the people who follow the conventions of the society, morals and traditions of the society are important to them. But opposite of them are the Peaces who live their lives in a very unconventional way, they do not follow the morals and traditions of the society. This dissimilar social background of the girls within the Black community is responsible for their difference in individual characters. But the differences between them help them to build a strong bond of friendship between the two girls. The novel also discusses the complicated relationship between the mother and daughter of both the families. The relationship between Eva Peace and Hannah Peace, Sula and Hannah, Helene Wright and her mother, Nel and Helene Wright are discussed in the novel.

So it can be said that this novel mainly discussed about the female bonding in the society of the Blacks. The lives of Sula and Nel are portrayed here in such a way that it shows their childhood friendship and also how their lives changes as they grow up. Sula moves against the traditions of the society to find her own self and Nel sticks to the conventions of the society.

Morrison considers outlaw women as fascinating and it is not always from the way they behave, but because historically women are seen as naturally disruptive and the status of women is considered as an illegal from birth. It can be seen in literature, if a woman escapes from the rule of man, the escape leads their life to regret, misery, if not complete disaster. Sula does not follow the norms of the society and she is considered to be evil in the society. *Sula* gives us the story about women who escape from the norms of the society and how they learnt to survive among the people with their different ways of living.

RELATIONSHIP OF SULA AND NEL:

Sula and Nel's relationship can also be seen as a relationship of sisterhood. Sula and Nel are of different personalities as the environment of the house where they live are also completely different. But these differences where they grow up did not keep them apart. Instead it helps them to find new identities and to develop a kind of support for one another. This novel has many challenges related to race, class, gender etc. and here the bonding among the women shows how these challenges can be met.

Nel is exposed to the kind of discrimination faced by the Blacks in her early childhood before she met Sula. It was in their journey to the house of Helene's grandmother. Helene in a hurry entered the wrong compartment of the train which consists of some twenty white men and women. And when they were about to enter the compartment which marked 'colored' on the door, the white conductor came towards them and asked Helene what she is doing there. Moreover he used the word 'gal'. After getting this kind of reaction from the conductor Helene's thought began to wander. She had not even reached her destination, her grandmother's house and already she had been called names by which the whites used to address the blacks. And her old fears of being somehow flawed gathered in her and she began to tremble because of this feelings. It shows how the blacks are looked at by the white people. And how the colored people feel when they are addressed by the word 'gal' can be seen in Helene's feelings. And Nel decided that she never wanted to be the object of discrimination. And when Sula came to her life Nel found a way to fight against the conventions of the society.

This novel demonstrates how bonding between two girls can change their personalities and make them strong, change their views of life and also protect one another at times of difficulties. Though the two girls are portrayed as different from one another there are some similarities which lead to the bonding between females in the colored society. The girls had already discovered their differences from the other people who live near them. The importance of freedom given to them by the society was clearly understood by them even at the early age. And moreover their meeting was considered to be a fortunate one because this can be seen as the starting point of their development.

All these issues made the female bonding possible in the society. Sula and Nel cherished their friendship and also it made them adventurous. They found relief in each other's personality. The incident where Sula tried to fight against the white boys to protect Nel shows how adventurous the friendship between the girls made them. They began to see the world as a place of amusement arranged for them. Through the incident of Chicken Little Morrison indicates the supportive nature of friendship. Sula was playing with Chicken Little but accidentally he slipped from her hands and drowned in the water. Sula cried for what she did. And it was Nel who quieted her.

The narrator describes here about Nel. "Nel quieted her. "Sh, sh. Don't, don't. You didn't mean it. It ain't your fault. Sh. Sh. Come on, le's go, Sula" (*Sula* 62-63) It shows how Nel supports Sula at each and every situation. Nel who is different from Sula stands with her at the difficult time of her friend. Sula and Nel both try to support and protect each other. The novel projects how strong female friendship can be with the incident of Chicken Little. Instead of informing about the drowning of Chicken Little to the people, she tried to be with her friend. For friendship she did not mind hiding the act Sula has committed. They were afraid if other people have seen them in their act. But Sula was not afraid of Nel. It shows how close and supportive their friendship was.

CHANGES IN FRIENDSHIP:

But this friendship between Sula and Nel shattered as they grow up. Many changes came in their life. It mainly started with the marriage of Nel with Jude Greene. The two friends are compelled to start a life of their own by the society. Nel decided to marry according to the conventions of the society. This shows how the society controlled the women in the society through different social issues like marriage. And this decision of Nel made Sula to move away from Nel in search of her own self. This novel mainly presents the bonding of women in black society. Though there are male characters in the novel, they are not given much importance. The story of the novel mainly revolves around the women characters. And the incident where Nel found Jude with Sula made everything clear. After this incident Jude left Nel forever. And the blame is put on Sula by Nel for her situation.

RACISM:

But problems like racial discrimination, class difference etc are faced also by the men in the society. For instance in case Jude Greene it is clearly visible. Jude was growing tired of his job as a waiter at the Hotel Medallion. He wanted to do some other works and news had already spread the work began on the New River Road. He wanted to do some real work. It is about Jude's dreams. How he always wanted to do some real work by leaving behind the job he was doing. He wanted changes within himself. But he knew that it was not easy for them to fulfill their dreams so easily in the society where they live. He soon found out how the blacks were discriminated from the white in the society. The Blacks were made to wait for their turn in the work but they were replaced by the people of Virginia hills, Greeks and the Italians. And they were always kept in the veil of lies and false hopes. The Blacks were kept running by the Whites in the hope of providing them work. But the Blacks never get any opportunity from the Whites. He found it hard to bear the discrimination and Jude wanted to show his superiority in some other ways and he chooses marriage as a way to fulfill his needs. The narrator describes that it was the rage of Jude and his determination to take a man's role that made him marry Nel. This act of Jude can be considered as the first step towards the tentional relationship of Nel and Sula.

In their childhood, their friendship was very intimate. According to the narrator, "Their friendship was so close, they themselves had difficulty distinguishing one's thoughts from the other's." (*Sula* 83) It was as if they were having the same thoughts about things around them. No one can make any difference on their views about life in the society of the colored people. Nel with Sula's company found a new self and the girls enjoyed their life to the fullest.

But after Nel's marriage everything changes and they start to distinguish themselves as 'the self' and 'the other'. The narrator describes, "Nel's response to Jude's shame and anger selected her away from Sula." (*Sula* 84) Nel decided to live her life in her own way by maintaining the conventions of the society. Another important person came into Nel's life, Jude. Their relationship cannot be said as a smooth one. Nel was ready to accept a new way of life by marrying Jude but this new relationship took her away from her childhood friendship. And Sula moved away from them to find her own self.

Their friendship was so strong that even after ten years when Sula came back, Nel could feel the changes that were occurring in the Bottom are due to Sula's return to the Bottom. Nel remembers about Sula. How Sula made her laugh, taught her to look at things in a different way and in the company of Sula how she felt clever and gentle. With Sula's return Nel's love for Jude became a bright and easy affection. But they did not know that they have already changed. They are no longer as they were before.

MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIP:

The environment of the house of Eva is completely different from that of Helene. This is the house set up by Eva alone without the support of any male in the family. And Hannah Peace is the eldest daughter of Eva. Hannah married Rekus and she lost him when their daughter was only three years old and she moved to her mother's house. This novel does not give much importance to the male character. So in most of the cases the man leaves the woman and the women alone have to live her life or look after the children. Hannah and Eva

live their own life independently. Their relationship can be best studied in context to the answer given by Eva Peace when Hannah asked her mother if she loved her children. Eva answered that Hannah has grown up to be a healthy young woman but still she is asking whether Eva cared for her children or not.

Again the narrator describes Hannah's thoughts, "I didn't mean that, Mamma. I know you fed us and all. I was talkin' 'bout something else. Like. Like. Playin' with us. Did you ever, you know, play with us?" (*Sula* 68) The novel here presents the condition of the society in 1895. How the niggers were dying and the situation of Eva was also pitiful. She was with her three children and three beets and at that condition it was not possible for Eva to play with her children as Hannah had asked Eva. And the incident where Eva jumped from her window to save Hannah when she saw her burning shows Eva's love for her children. But the same Eva who tried to save Hannah also killed Plum. Now if we look into the relationship of Sula and her mother Hannah we find that their bonding is different from the Nel-Helene and Hannah- Eva relationship. Sula is not close to her mother as Nel. It may be because of the environment where Sula grew. We find Helene always instructing Nel to do certain things but it is different with Sula. She used to enjoy things on her own. The strange birth mark on Sula's face makes her different from other people in the society and she also has an odd way of looking at things which makes her ideas different from the ideas of the society. The kind of bond between Sula and Hannah can be best understood from the incident where Sula heard Hannah's conversation with her friends. Though it is not clear in the novel, this incident can be said as the point where Sula grew hatred for her mother in her heart. One July day Sula heard Hannah talking to her two friends Pasty and Valentine about the problems of child rearing. And they were discussing about their own children. The words where Hannah said that she love Sula but she did not like her produced great effects in Sula's heart. And after a few days when Hannah was burning Eva tried her best to save her daughter but she could not. Hannah died on her way to the hospital. And Eva, lying in the hospital remembered something. Sula was standing on the porch just looking at Hannah when she was burning but she did not come forward for any help. This was the bond shared between Sula and Hannah.

In the book, *Women without Men: Female Bonding and the American Novel of the 1980s* by Donald J. Greiner, he mentions Lionel Tiger's idea about female bonding. Lionel Tiger summarizes, "In both violent and aggressive action male bonding is the predominant instrument of organization. Females tend to be excluded from aggressive organizations...They do not form groups which are expressly devoted to violent activity or to potentially violent action." But this concept can be questioned by the novel *Sula* (1973) by Toni Morrison, in the novel the bond between females can be distinctly found. And the male characters of the novel do not involve themselves in any kind of bond as the female characters. And also the way Sula behaves and engages in violent activity in the novel can be seen. Also the novels of 19680s, *John Dollar* (1989) by Marianne Wiggin and *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) by Gloria Naylor the idea of female bonding can be found. Hrdy rejects Tiger's opinion and argues that females also take part in competition and bonding. Those type of female who are sexually active or highly competitive and those who are interested to gain high status in the society. And here in the novel *Sula* the character of Sula Peace and Eva Peace can be said as highly competitive.

Morrison eliminates the bonding of the male character in *Sula*. There are many male characters like Shadrack, Wiley Wright, BoyBoy, Plum, Ajax, Jude etc. but Morrison focuses on the domain of the women in the novel. As for instance in the novel, the character of Eva Peace and Sula Peace can be said as strong characters in the novel. They decided to go against the conventions of the society to find their own independent self. Also in the novels like *John Dollar* by Marianne Wiggin and *The Women of Brewster Place* by Gloria Naylor, males are destroyed and repudiated by the sterility and violence associated with female bonding in the novels.

The mother-daughter relationship can be studied with reference to Nancy Chodorow's work *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978). Freud's theories of gender formation and bonding are challenged by Chodorow and it is concerned with the mother- daughter bond. Chodorow raised the question related to the nurturing of children. In most cultures we see women as the principal nurtures of children. And the question is why it happens in the society. The answer she has for it is that the role a female play in the society makes her to take the role of the principal nurturers. And the bond between mother and daughter is different from

the bond between mother and son. Women's mothering can be observed as one of the few universal and enduring elements of the sexual division of labor. Whatever the conditions of the society might be or how busy she must have been throughout the day, she still has to face the responsibility of the children in the house. In her book *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978), Chodorow provides the study of mother-daughter relationship from an object-relation perspective. She argues that female identity is developed by closeness and connection to the mother. The relationship of a mother and a child influences both boys and girls in the development of their identity. First the child is attached to the mother but after certain age the boy child starts to identify with the father and the girl child continue to identify with the mother. The boy starts denying their attachment with the mother as they identify with the father but girls continue their attachment to the mother because of the mother's role model position.

MOTHER-SON RELATIONSHIP:

Keeping this concept in view, in *Sula* we can study the relationship between mother-son and mother-daughter with the relationship of Eva and Plum and also Eva and Hannah. The bond Plum and Hannah shared with their mother is different. As for instance, Hannah returns home to Eva after the death of Hannah's husband and started to live with Eva. And Eva is even ready to risk her own life to save her daughter, it is clearly portrayed by Morrison in the incident where Eva jumped out of the window when she saw Hannah burning.

But it is not the same with Plum. The relationship of Plum with his mother is different. And Eva herself killed Plum. When Hannah asked Eva the reason behind her act, Eva said that Plum wanted to crawl back into Eva's womb and Eva has no room for Plum in her. Eva told Hannah how she saved Plum in the outhouse by opening his bowels and pulling the stools out. It was the hottest day in Medallion.

It shows the hard times Eva faced with Plum and now after he has grown up he again wanted to be in his mother's womb. But Eva has no space for him in her womb. Plum was behaving like a baby. Plum was helpless and thinking baby thoughts and dreaming baby dreams. Eva wanted Plum to die like a man and so she killed Plum.

CONCLUSION:

Thus, this novel shows us the different types of bonding in a black society and how this bond changes with time is also clearly seen in the novel. Toni Morrison's *Sula* portrays the failed friendship which is the result of the patriarchal society. It also portrays the once strong bond of friendship between Nel and Sula, the two young Black girls of Bottom. Their friendship becomes so strong that it becomes difficult for them to distinguish one from the other. Their friendship becomes the reason for the unity of their self and the other. But as they grow up, Nel and Sula give up their unity of self and other formed during their girlhood friendship and develops a type of self-centeredness which results in the break of their friendship. *Sula* also examines the plight of the society of the Bottom which faces class and race discrimination in the White society. The lives of the people in the Bottom also depict the lives of the African American societies to fight oppression. The friendship between Nel and Sula empowers Nel to cross the limits of the conventional society.

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