

Toni Morrison's Sula : A journey of Self Actualization

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Abstract: Born on 18th February 1931 in Lorain, Ohio; Toni Morrison is well known African-American novelist who has written at length on issues of race and gender. She is the first African-American writer to win the Noble Prize for literature in 1993. This paper is an attempt to depict Morrisons's s idea of a modern woman through the character of Sula. Undoubtedly Morrison's female protagonists are more powerful than their counterparts. The double alienation of being black and being a woman is forcefully depicted in each and every novel written by her. Traditionally women lives have been organized and manipulated by patriarchy in all ages, all cultures, and all countries by establishing values, roles, gender-perception and idealism that prescribes unequal means, methods and roots to achieve the so-called 'wholeness' for women. The history gives 'his' story and not 'her' story. And when women try to define themselves as opposed the culture to do so, they are condemned as reactionaries to destabilize society. The revolt of women never goes unpunished and Morrison beautifully depicts these women rebel as an alienated self. Morrison realized that she must narrate women's experiences, otherwise others would it incorrectly. To a certain extent, Morrison's alienated characters emerged as how woman can live afresh.

Keyword: Individual self, racism, self actualization, sexism, woman rebel

Women are surely different from men. In a male dominated world, they are treated differently and have greater difficulty in finding fulfillment in life. Typically women have been socially conditioned to be wives and mothers, so choices of what they can become are extremely limited. A woman is judged by a set of standards that have nothing to do with her particular capabilities.

Women of colour experience double political loyalties because they must confront both racism and sexism. Their experiences are unique especially in the way sexism and racism intersects in their life. The American standard of an ideal woman is one in which she is expected to be white and beautiful. And the black women do not fit in this picture of ideal American lady. Sex and race have been so closely woven in the lives of the women of colour that it is not surprising that in Black female literature, black writers concentrate on this relationship consciously or unconsciously.

Black Fiction of 1970s charts out the evolution of black women from stereotype to characters, from dependency to self empowerment. Her development passes through two stages: dissolution of the imposed negative self, and emergence of a composite new self. The journey of the black women from innocence to maturity culminated in 1970s which adorns the literary text of women novelist like Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou Gayle Jones, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde and Ntozake Shange etc.

Morrison's women characters are thus forced to discover for themselves self-enhancing role models who are self-actualizing and whose identities are not dependent on men. She tries to free black women from the hackneyed role of earlier black heroines who were helpless victims in the chauvinistic hands of white society and society of blacks. It does not mean that Morrison's women characters are not victims of racism and sexism, but as self actualized women, they are able to recognize their potentialities.

It is from her family that Morrison learns about women as creative force. Her grandmother and mother both guided her through childhood and provided her with the example of women as creative force. Morrisson's heroines face life with strength and hardness. Usually woman writers instead of presenting psychological development of women in search of fulfillment, projects a type. But Morrison's heroines project not a type but a psyche. Her heroines are ever engaged in struggle for establishing their identity in an unfavorable milieu. Morrison emphasizes on one's need to realize one's potentiality which leads to self-esteem:

Insisting on the relationship of women as self and as part of community, she prefigured the major themes of black women's fiction in the 1970s The black woman's potential as a full person and necessarily a major Protagonist in the socio-cultural issues of the times (Manmohan K Bhatnagar 314).

The female protagonists of Morrison know that growth involves pain and they are willing to pay the price. They feel in some way life is a journey and **"are willing to take the risk of dissolution of old relationships in their search for a better future"** (Shostrom 181). Morrison heroines strive for self actualization, self discovery and self fulfillment. They rejected that society has ordained for them. They do not wait for a man to urge them to action or give shelter. They accept themselves as independent entities and feel their own power to the fullest. Morrison's **"fictional characters struggle for their liberation from being manipulated by a corporate society"** (Manmohan K. Bhatnagar 317).

Sula, the heroine of Morrison's second novel; **SULA (1973)**, is a woman for self. In **SULA**, the winner of the National Book Critics Award, Morrison launches forth a dynamic female protagonist who reflects the new women's quest for identity. Sula is not ready to accept what society expects of her. She has no wish to make or mother anyone. Women have been viewed as mother, wife, mistress, sex objects- in their relationship to men. But Sula is a woman who deliberately departs from a socially approved stereotype by playing a new role, developing a new life style for which she has to pay a heavy price in terms of guilt, alienation or psychosis. Sula is a "self actualizing, strong, risk-taking, independent but also capable of loving and being loved" (Ruth Yeazell 29-38).

Set in a Midwestern town black community called Bottom, the story of **SULA** follows the lives of Sula, a free spirit, who is considered a threat against the community, and her cherished friend Nel, from their childhood to maturity and to death. Sula and Nel have radically different personalities. Nel is quiet and unassuming while Sula is spontaneous and aggressive. For Sula, Nel was "the other half of her equation" (SULA 121) and together they formed a whole. They found in each other the love and security they lack in their own families. By the time the girls reach adulthood, Nel Wright chooses to follow the life pattern of Bottom society by deciding to get married and have children. And Sula Peace decides to leave Bottom to get education and thus trying to create her own life pattern to achieve her own self. By surrendering herself to Bottom life totally, Nel becomes a victim to racism and sexism whereas Sula raises herself above the question of black and white, male and female or life and death. She lives out her own fantasies. Her self discovery eventually leads her towards the path of self actualization.

Shortly after Nel's wedding, Sula leaves Bottom for a period of ten years. She has many affairs, some with white men also. However she finds people following the same boring routines elsewhere, so she returns to Bottom and Nel. When she returns she refuses to maintain the family house in the manner of her mother and grandmother. 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).

Sula is a pariah whose values are often polar opposites of those adopted by her provincial society. Sula creates her own realities and sets her own personal objectives. She is guided by a firm sense of me-ness as is evident from her declaration on the question of marriage. Instead of getting married, she “wants to make herself” (SULA42). Her sense of wholeness does not center on the traditional roles of women as only wives and mothers. Morrison uses the character of Sula to question the tendency to blindly accept existence as a given rather than something which can be challenged. Sula can be taken as a model for black community as she chooses to define herself, as opposed the culture to do so, especially since its definition are negative ones. She spurns the community and questions marriage, the social institution which legitimize the subordination of women.

Sula neither suppresses nor overcomes sexuality. On the contrary, she adds a subversive dimension to it. She breaks away from community in pursuit of self identity. Unlike Nel and most other characters Sula remains isolated from the community and subverts not merely whiteness but also blackness as well socio-cultural norms that define black woman. The portrayal of Sula is never digested by the critics of Africanism who see Africa as an ‘invented’ one. To give some fixed notions and myths the western writers made this invented Africa either ineffectual or defined it according to their own convenience. One has to break free from this fixed definition of Africanism and feminism, and Sula does it. 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, freighting the boys by saying “**if I do that to myself, what you suppose I’ll do to you?**” (SULA 54-55)

Sula is endowed with dimension of other possibilities; the possibility of art, of intellectual creation. She can not be viewed in relationship of oppressor and oppressed, male and female, black and white. 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, to feel pleasure as to give pleasure, hers was an experimental life (SULA 118).

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 can not afford to alone 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 self actualized 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 us to the possibility of ideal affirmative condition of reciprocal recognition and the recovery of alienated and subordinate self.

Sula supersedes the question of gender and race. Her status as woman is only a small part of how perceives herself and ultimately how she is perceived by readers. The same goes for race. Sula's blackness also transcends race altogether. She is simply too much of an enigma to be truly representative either group. She is not about saving race but herself. While Sula's relationship functions as explicit criticism of black values and patterns of behaviour, they are also a vehicle for grasping Sula's real identity. She is neither an evil nor a fixed, but an unchanging absolute. Rather, as the sensual and the experimental, she "**represents potential: the raw energy of life and the creative impulse of art**" (Wilfred D Samuels 32). 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.

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