



Negotiating the Real and the Fantastic in Toni Morrison's *Sula*

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Abstract:

'Desire' is one of the very prominent motifs in the narratives of Morrison. Desire takes many forms of craving, longing and yearning for the unattainable and unknown. All the protagonists of Morrison have multiple desires for many material and immaterial things in life. None of the protagonists described by Morrison are untouched by aspirations. One can also witness the 'burden of fervent desires' in the many of her characters. They constantly strive for fulfillment in the real world but due to adverse social, geographical, racial and economic conditions, they are unable to do so, therefore they search in the world of fantasy, where there are no restrictions or limitations. This paper attempts to explore the blend of reality and fantasy in her very famous novel *Sula*.

Keywords: Reality, fantasy, magic realism, desire

I. INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison was one of the prolific writers of black diaspora who used the technique of blending real and fantasy, in her novels brilliantly. While studying her characters, one encounters the several human emotions. They live in real and magical as well. In the real world they are unable to rise from their existence. Though they are far from reality, they wander in the world of imagination where, their troubled, suffering soul relaxes. To fulfill desires in fantastical world is their safety shell for the African Americans which prevent them from insanity. When the desires become more powerful, the fantastical elements begin to dominate the real, they go beyond insanity.

Magic realism is sometimes a means to escape from insufferable life. In Morrison's fictions, insanity and craziness have profound importance. For the female protagonists, madness is either an obvious choice or natural to their behavior, which is also depicted by the writer to show their concealed desires. They are unable to understand these cravings and are unable to control themselves in the face of enforced passivity and powerlessness. Her characters are seen to accept abnormality to explain their inner reality. Morrison tries to unravel the logic inherent in their madness, and shows how their emotional and psychological crises

are resolved and how the incomprehensible and complex inner experiences are simplified by extraordinary means.

The queerness of Sula, becomes her empowerment is very much in evidence. The very fact of being dismissed as queer gives her courage and opportunity to be unconventional and non-conforming beyond question. Sula's stance that is branded abnormal has its roots in a determination to be true to herself and unwillingness to forfeit her self-respect for the gratification of the community's interests. Barbara Christian characterizes Sula as "the most radical of the characters of seventies' fiction, for she overturns the conventional definitions 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 be the lover of men" (*Trajectories of Self*, 241). Non-conformity leaves Sula immensely free to follow inner dictates without restriction or distraction from external influences.

Some of the major characters can be analyzed on these parameters. The protagonists in *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Beloved*, *Jazz*, *Song of Solomon* and *Paradise* can be seen either to have split personalities or seem to be undergoing phases of madness. They are obviously different from others and are therefore often stigmatized as 'abnormal.' According to Shoshna Felman, who is what patriarchy "tries to eliminate under the label of madness is nothing other than feminine difference" (73). Women characters of Morrison who are labeled mad pass through this phase only to rediscover their feminine differences and are able to resolve their inner complexities and confusions. Periodic insanity helps them to come to terms with bewildering circumstances, which in everyday life is difficult to bear. Though their responses, in this temporarily demented state, are emotionally exaggerated, many a times beyond all reasonable proportions, but it provides relief to tensions and saves them from succumbing to total insanity which the situation warrants.

This heterosexual relationship one finds in *Sula*. Sula and her bosom buddy, Nel confront when out of the house and away from the mother's words and influence, they express the deep sensuality of their companionship. "They ran in the sunlight creating their own breeze which pressed their dresses into their damp skin. They lie in the grass, feeling the points of contact between the ground and their adolescent bodies, their small breasts just now beginning to create some pleasant discomfort when they were lying on their stomachs" (*Sula*, 49).

They have cut themselves free of mothers and domestic enclosures to spend the day by the river. They are passing the time poking at the grass and talking about sex. Their heightened sensual perception and the range of sensual gratification experienced by them will soon be lost as adult sexuality channels take control and their desire towards pure sexual gratification dominate. Barbara Smith rightly states in *Towards a Black Feminist Criticism* "the childhood relationship between Nel and Sula a primary expression of Sula's lesbianism, which as an adult she is not able to fully realize" (27). We feel Smith errs in couching her argument solely in terms of sexuality and in ascribing all of Sula's radical behavior to an innate but thwarted lesbianism. Sula is an extremely political figure whose passionate articulation of contradiction casts a critical perspective upon all forms of domination.

While Nel and Sula lie in the grass, a little boy comes along, about three to four years old, his name is Chicken Little. After helping him up and down a tree, Sula brings to swirl him around and around, high in the air, until her hands give way, propelling Chicken Little into the river, where he sinks from sight. The drawing of Chicken Little enacts the same ambivalence Sula is made to feel about herself as Alice Walker's Meridian feels towards her baby in arms. Sula is twelve year-old girl and in that precarious period of adolescence, is able to identify with both the child and the mother. Morrison's portrayal of Sula's accidental murder of Chicken Little ought to be read in the light of Alice Walker's depiction of Meridian's decisions to terminate pregnancy. Both the accidental and the purposeful acts are fraught with the contradictions that heterosexuality and childbearing bestowed on women. Sula's day at the river is bracketed on one side by her mother's cutting definition of the contradiction between loving and liking, and on the other by Shadrack's equally fatal word, 'Always', which he whispers to Sula soon after she kills Chicken Little. If one views Shadrack in his structural relationship to Sula as an adult male, then his single word voices the imprisonment that adult female heterosexuality means for women in this society and for black women in particular.

Sula's life is a challenge in the male dominated heterosexual roles of women. Sula's struggle is something different than what men generally think of the women. The women are known to them either mothers or whores, but Sula has a close affinity with Nel (woman) and not with a man. The mother in the novel is Helen, Nel's mother, whose sexuality was determined by her husband's long and frequent absences which sublimated into the care for her daughter. The prostitute in the novel Creole, Nel's grandmother, whose clothes perfume and patois were according to the responsive to male model. Abandoned by her husband, she recognizes that a life devoted to rearing her children will be as devoid of pleasure as her relationship to her husband probably was, except that his presence and demands made it impossible for her to question the lack of gratification. Sula's challenge is to bring the terms of childhood relationship (with Nel) into the adult world which was full of exuberance, fearlessness, supportiveness and delight. It is not an easy task for Sula to maintain the adult female sexuality under male dominating society.

The alternative provided by Sula couldn't be more explicit or more direct. In having sex with Nel's husband, she strikes at the way male domination control women's freedom and mobility, condemning them to the anguish of possessive love. The first instance was, when as an adolescent Sula chases off a gang of White boys by cutting off the tip of her own finger to dramatize her refusal of racially motivated male domination. The second was when as an adult, when she steals Nel's husband to reveal how heterosexual, nuclear family stifles women's aspirations and desires. Sula's challenge has been to suggest the possibility of creating female equivalent to male. Sula's challenge is finally, directed to the reader to imagine their adolescent love evolved into adult understanding of their bonding. The real challenge of course, would be to continue the relationships as adult heterosexual women. Such an association would avoid the exclusionary and interiorizing tendencies associated with male bonding. It won't fall prey to separatism, whose power to undermine and destroy male sexual domination is checked by the very nature of separatism. The germ of such a feminist union exists in Nel and Sula's childhood companionship. And, while they never bring it to

fruition as adults, Nel, at the end of the novel, does finally come to recognize the terms of Sula's challenge when she remarks: "All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude. And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat, we were girls together, she said as though explaining something. 'O lord Sula' she cried, 'girl, girl, girl'" (*Sula*, 149).

Nel's repeated wailing captures the grief of an opportunity missed. Its profound effect is to make the reader to reflect back upon the novel. Did Nel lose a chance? Should women accept Sula's challenge? Sula, no doubt, is a solemn figure of challenge. But there is an alternative vision in the novel which Sula does not perpetuate, but which nevertheless nurtured her and made it possible for her to articulate a radical perspective on women's freedom. There is the three-woman household, comprising Sula's grandmother, Eva Peace; her mother Hannah; and Sula herself. The three-women household is a strategic arrangement that crops up throughout Morrison's writings to suggest an alternative and utopian possibility for redefining the space and the relationships associated with social reproduction. In *The Bluest Eye* the three-women household is the upstairs apartment belonging to three prostitutes, where Pecola often goes for refuge and companionship. Here in sharp contrast to the grim hostility and oppression of her mother's house, Pecola finds three heterosexual women who do not live with men or in families, who share chores, food and conversation. This real world is something different desirable for Pecola and therefore she loves their company. These women do not work as domestics but make money off men. The point is not whether Morrison suggests prostitution as a viable alternative to male domination, but how burning and unfulfilled desire bring women in such type of profession.

Rituals are very much a part of the African American folk tradition. They help the women reach an understanding of their own lives and refrain from self-destructive activities. The problems of the African American women seem more glaring and starker as we are taken in by the language and images through which Morrison depicts the problematic. She goes beyond the depiction through her master style of using magical realism. The real and the magical seem to submerge into each other, but they seem to have a beginning and end in 'desire'.

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