

Feminism and Subaltern Element in Toni Morrison's *Sula*

Dr. Archana Durgesh (Supervisor)
Associate Professor, B.B.D.U. Lucknow (U.P.) India

Nigar Alam
Ph.D. Scholar, B.B.D.U. Lucknow (U.P.) India

Abstract

Born Chloe Anthony Wofford in Ohio in 1931, Morrison is the author of seven critically acclaimed novels and a Professor at Princeton University. She won the Pulitzer Prize for her novel *Beloved*, and received even greater recognition when she received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. Toni Morrison was first African-American woman to win the award. Morrison began her writing career with her first novel *The Bluest Eye*. *Sula* is her second novel and deals with themes of race, womanhood and the contingencies of love, and their effect on the beliefs and actions of the individuals. *Sula* is the story of two women, Sula and Nel, who are childhood friends. Raised together in the Bottom (a hillside Black community), these poor girls are chic and dream of enhanced lives. Sula does manage to escape, hopping from city to city all across America for ten years. On her return, the variance with her best friend Nel and other women in the town is the main theme of the book. Everybody failed to comprehend Sula, and due to the strange, dark events that lend to accompany Sula, people mistrust her even more. It is the family life for which Nel is so much suited is broken down by Sula. Neither are they willing to understand each other. It is this quality that ultimately damages both of them.

Key Words: black subordination, womanhood, relationship

It's often noted that Black Writers have to pander to a white audience instead of concentrating solely on writing. Morrison intended on creating a common of Black work. Her literary works can and should be considered in this light and her fictions certainly deal with the complex experiences of Blacks with Whites.

Sula is essentially related to black feminism. Black feminism points out that discrimination based on sex, rank and race are related together. Feminism that works to overcome the practice of unfair treatment of women and human beings according to their position in society often ignores the prejudiced outlook towards racial bias. The National Feminist Organization was founded in 1973 by

Florynce Kennedy, Margaret Sloan and Doris Wright. According to Wright, 'more than any other organization in the century launched a frontal assault on sexism and racism.' Alice Walker and other feminists pointed out black women experienced a vicious and acute kind of oppression from that of white women.

Barbara Smith since 1970s has been functioning as a critic, teacher, lecturer, author, scholar and publisher of Black feminist idea. She was academically brilliant and attended reputed public schools, yet she faced humiliating experiences of racism. In her essay *Toward a Black Feminist Criticism*, 1977, she advocates her main concern that black women's writing has been overlooked and

ignored. Black women literature is not adequately appreciated and recognised. It is believed their work of fiction is not relevant to majority of people. She wraps up her essay by presenting element of Black feminism in Toni Morrison's novel *Sula*. She writes "Sula and Nel must also struggle with the constrictions of racism upon their lives. The knowledge that "they were neither white nor male" (p.2 *Sula*) is the inherent explanation of their need for each other. Morrison depicts in literature the necessary bonding that has always taken place between black women for the sake of barest survival. Together the two girls can find the courage to create themselves."(p. 22-27) She further writes in her essay "*Sula* is an exceedingly lesbian novel in the emotions expressed, in the definition of female character and in the way that the politics of heterosexuality are portrayed."(p. 22-27) "The work might be clearer still if Morrison had approached her subject with the consciousness that a lesbian relationship was at least a possibility for her characters. Obviously Morrison did not intend the reader to perceive Sula and Nel's relationship as inherently lesbian."(p. 22-27) However she argues "What I have tried to do here is not to prove that Morrison wrote something that she did not, but to point out how a black feminist critical perspective at least allows consideration of this level of the novel's meaning."(p. 22-27)

Deborah E. Mc Dowell in her essay *New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism*, 1980 challenged Smith's reading of *Sula* as a lesbian novel, noting that it was an inaccurate and incomplete assessment. She also admitted the need for a black feminist criticism and called for a solid definition of black feminism in her essay. In another

essay by Deborah E. Mc Dowell *Boundaries: Or Distant Relations and Close Kin*, 1989 she writes "That we are far from a final definition of black feminist criticism – assuming that that is a desirable goal – should cause no undue concern, for black literary feminists do not comprise a unitary essence, nor is their critical methodology already settled, defined and conceptually unified."(p.52). She points out the uncertainty of Sula as a character that destroys traditional norms of acceptable behaviour and "transcends the boundaries of social and linguistic convention."(p.60) She further writes "The two are likened to "two throats and one eye" (p.147 *Sula*). But while Sula and Nel are represented as two parts of a self, those parts are distinct; they are complimentary, not identical. Although Sula and Nel might have a common vision (suggested by "one eye"), their needs and desires are distinct (they have "two throats"). Sula comes to understand the fact of their difference."(p.62). She also probes about the many gaps in the text which gives scope to the readers to create their own meanings. "Why is there no funeral for either Plum or Hannah? What happens to Jude? Where was Eva during her eighteen-month absence from the Bottom? What really happened to her leg? How does Sula support herself after she returns from her ten-year absence?"(p. 69)

"The reader's participation in the meaning-making process helps to fill in the gaps in the text as well as to bridge the gaps separating the reader from the text."(p. 69)

The Bottom is a mostly black community in Ohio, situated in the hills above the mostly white, affluent community of Medallion. The Bottom first became a community when a master gave it to his

former slave. This “gift” was in fact a trick:

“A joke. A nigger joke. That was the way it got started...A good white farmer promised freedom and a piece of bottom land to his slave if he would perform some very difficult chores. When the slave completed the work, he asked the farmer to keep his end of the bargain. Freedom was easy – the farmer had no objection to that. But he didn’t want to give up any land. So he told the slave that he was very sorry that he had to give him valley land. He had hoped to give him a piece of the Bottom. The slave blinked and said he thought valley land was bottom land. The master said, “On, no! See those hills? That’s bottom land, rich and fertile.”

“But it’s high up in the hills,” said the slave. “High up from us,” said the master, “but when God looks down, it’s the bottom. That’s why we call it so, it’s the bottom of heaven – best land there is.” (pp. 4-5)

The Nigger later came to know how backbreaking this hilly land was.

The trick, though, led to the growth of a vibrant community. Now the community faced a new threat; wealthy whites have taken a liking to the land, and would like to destroy much of the town in order to build a golf course. Taking away the; “small consolation in the fact that every day they (the blacks) could literally look down on the white folks.” (p.5)

The novel opens in 1919, Shadrack a resident of the Bottom, fought in World War I. He returns a shattered man, unable to accept the complexities of the world; he lives on the outskirts of town, attempting to create order in his life. He had a traumatic experience of war and due to his

fear of death, invents National Suicide Day. The town at first is wary of him but over time, they come to terms with it and unthinkingly accept him.

Meanwhile, the families of the children Nel and Sula are contrasted. Nel is Helene Wrights’ daughter, who was the daughter of New Orleans Creole prostitute, Rochelle. Helene’s strictly religious grandmother, Cecile, raised her until she was safely married off to Willy Wright, at the tender age of sixteen. Helene lives a comfortable middle class life in the Bottom. After nine years of marriage, she gave birth to her only child, Nel who is the product of a family that believes deeply in social conventions; hers is a stable home, though by some it may be characterized as rigid. When Cecile dies, Helene takes her 10 years old daughter Nel to New Orleans for the funeral. On their way up to New Orleans we come across (the black-white) racism – when the conductor on finding Helene climbing in the coach meant for whites, snarled at her asking, “... What was you doin’ back in there? What was you doin’ in that coach yonder?” “We made a mistake, Sir. You see there wasn’t no sign. We just got in the wrong car, that’s all Sir.” (p.21)

After turning a page or two we come across another such reference when Helene intensely wanted to relieve herself. She, “... looked about the tiny station house for a door that said COLORED WOMEN...” (p. 23-24)

In their own country, they (Niggers) are treated as if they are not humans. Morrison has brought out the subalterns treatment marvellously in her novel *Sula*. Though Helene’s eccentricity is perfectly linked to the rich whites of Medallion, Helene still

suffers from racism, as can be seen by her experience on the train. When Nel meets Rochelle, her grandmother and a former prostitute, the only unconventional woman in the family, she experiences her first private moment of self-defragmentation:

Nel sat on the red-velvet sofa listening to her mother but remembering the smell and the tight, tight hug of the woman in yellow...

... She got out of bed and lit the lamp to look in the mirror. There was her face, plain brown eyes, three braids and the nose her mother hated. She looked for a long time and suddenly a shiver ran through her.

'I'm me, she whispered "Me".

... Each time she said the word *me* there was a gathering in the like power, like joy, like fear

"Me," she murmured. And then, sinking deeper into the quilts, "I want ... I want to be ... wonderful. Oh Jesus, make me wonderful". (pp. 28-29)

Due to her "new found me-ness", Nel sleeps only to wake up reborn the next morning. She resolved to build herself according to her own rules, to find power within herself.

Sula's family is very different; she lives with her grandmother, Eva (Eva Peace, who was abandoned by her husband, BoyBoy, when their three children were young. She struggled to keep her family away from starvation, but she succeeded only through the kindness of her neighbors), Hannah, her mother – both of whom are seen as eccentric and loose by the town. Their house also serves as a home for three informally adopted boys –

the Deweys, white drunk – Tar Baby and a steady stream of borders.

Helene is disgruntled, when Nel befriends Sula, a girl with a birth mark over one of her eyes, (which some termed as a snake, some as rose bud, some as tadpole and some as ashes of Hannah) because Hannah, Sula's mother, has a loose reputation. However, Helene comes to accept the relationship because Sula seems well behaved when she visits Helene's flawless home.

Eva had mysteriously gained new wealth when she went away for 18 months, leaving her children with the neighbors, but had also lost a leg. Her neighbors speculate that she deliberately placed her leg underneath a train in order to collect on an insurance claim.

Later, when, BoyBoy briefly visited, Eva received him without outward signs of animosity. During his visit he never asked about his children, and when he left with his sophisticated, city girlfriend, Eva looks forward to the long-standing hatred she will hold for him. With her mysterious money, Eva builds the rambling house where she now lives with her daughter – Hannah, granddaughter – Sula, three informally adopted-Deweys, Tar Baby- a white alcoholic, lives in one room drinking him to death and not to forget the stream of borders. Hannah and Eva both love "maleness". Eva enjoys flirting with them, although she does not sleep with them. Hannah on the other hand, sleeps with any man she fancies:

... She made men aware of her behind, her slim ankles, the dew-smooth skin and incredible length of neck. Then the smile-eyes, the turn of the head-all so welcoming, light

and playful. Her voice trailed, dipped and bowed; she gave a chord to the simplest words. Nobody, but nobody, could say “hey sugar” like Hannah. When he

heard it the man tipped his hat down a little over his eyes, hoisted his trousers and thought about the hollow place at the base of her neck. (pp 42-43)

For her spontaneous love making, Hannah due to lack of private places, used cellar, pantry or her bedroom but for the least as Sula slept in that room. But:

The men, surprisingly, never gossiped about her. She was unquestionably a kind and generous woman and that, coupled with her extraordinary beauty and funky elegance of manner, made them defend her and protect her from any vitriol that new-comers or their wives might spill. (pp. 44-45)

When Plum (Ralph Peace, Eva’s youngest and best – loved child) returns from World War I, he is ravaged by his war experience and heroin addiction. One night Eva enters his bedroom to rock him in her arms. Later on she pours kerosene over him and burns him alive. The contrast which has been drawn in this particular part of the novel is rather staggering. Where Eva gave a safe haven to so many people, she killed her own child. Eva’s decision to kill Plum represents the woolly clout of love. Because of her love for Plum, she couldn’t watch her son further into addiction. On one hand, this is a forfeit; a mother putting an end to her own son’s life and on the other this may be interpreted as an act of egocentricity; because she takes on the power to decide what’s best for him, and believes death is superior over addiction.

Love drives people to act both self-centered and altruistic, both beautiful and disgusting love are not subjected to morality.

The contrast between Sula’s and Nel’s upbringing is amazing, where Nel’s household is bound by social conventions, Sula’s in contrast is built on eccentric family structure. Nel’s household is inert, well-kept and always in order whereas Sula’s household is huge, incoherent, active and vivacious.

Nel and Sula share entirely different personalities Nel is docile and quiet, while Sula is spontaneous and aggressive. Together Sula and Nel seem to form two halves of a whole person:

Nel and Sula walked through this valley of eyes chilled by the wind and heated by the embarrassment of appraising stares

... His name was Ajax. His reputation was derived from the way he handled words ... So when he said “pig meat” as Nel and Sula passed, they guarded their eyes lest someone see their delight. (p.50)

Both the girls are feeling very happy when Ajax took notice of their developing bodies and muttered “pig meat” for them.

A group of Irish boys begun to harass Black children:

Four white boys in their early teens, sons of some newly arrived Irish people, occasionally entertained themselves in the afternoon by harassing black school-children. With shoes that pinched the woolen knickers that made red rings on their calves, they had come to this valley with their parents believing as they did that it was a promised land –

green and shimmering with welcome ... In part their place in this world was secured only when they echoed the old resident's attitude towards blacks.

These particular boys caught Nel once, and pushed her from hand to hand until they grew tired of the frightened helpless face. (pp. 53-54)

Since this incident Nel and Sula avoided them by taking a circuitous route home from school. When they confront the boys a second time, Sula draws a knife and cuts off the tip of a finger to demonstrate what she plans to do to them should they continue harassing them. The boys disturbed by her calm, cool demeanour leave them alone. It can be interpreted as a perfect example of racism and even as repression boys try to show off on girls, as they are the easiest victims that too blacks are simply perfect for whites to harass.

One day Sula, overhears a conversation, Hannah is having with other women:

...I love Sula, I just don't like her.
That's the difference
Guess so Likin' them is another thing.
Sure. They different people, you know...
She only heard Hannah's words and the pronouncement sent her flying up the stairs. In bewilderment, she stood at the window fingering the curtain edge, aware of a sting in her eye... (p.57)

This incident perturbed Sula quite a lot. Nel's call made Sula come back from the excruciating reverie caused due to her mother's insensate words. Hannah's offhand comment has put a question mark on a mother's love for her child.

Later, Chicken Little, neighborhood boy happens to pass the place Nel and Sula are talking. Sula defends him when Nel teases him. Sula playfully swings him around by his hands, but suddenly he slips from Sula's grip and accidentally falls into the river and drowns. Sula runs to Shadrack for comfort, accidentally leaving her belt behind. Sula and Nel had a doubt that Shadrack saw the whole incident of Chicken Little. Sula ran to his place but found no one there. The moment she was about to leave, he came there; "He was smiling, a great smile, heavy with lust and time to come nodded his head as though answering a question, and said, in pleasant conversational tone, a tone cooled butter, "Always". (p.62)

Shadrack had answered the question, Sula never asked; "... and its promise licked at her feet." (p.63) Nel is cool and calm, stating that nobody saw if they decided to keep quiet and say nothing about the accident to anyone. A bargeman finds Chicken Little's body. The Whites in positions of power consider the death of a Black child to be of little consequence; one of the Whites goes up to an extent suggesting the bargeman – why didn't he throw him back in the water. It's so annoying for them. Sula and Nel both attend Chicken Little's funeral, again Nel is calm and collected but is burdened with a heavy sense of guilt, whereas Sula cries freely, but feels no where guilty at all. Nel is guilty; Sula is grieving while the Whites feel nothing at all.

Eva's adopted Deweys went to first standard together irrespective of their age difference and are intensely attached to one another. There is utmost difficulty in drawing a boundary between their individual identities. On the contrary, Nel

asserts her independence and begins to resist Helene's attempt to mould her according to her own desires.

A fierce wind sweeps through the Bottom, tearing up trees and leaving behind heat wave. The next day Hannah vexes Eva, when she asks if Eva had ever loved her, Plum or Pearl (Eva's second daughter) Eva retorts that the desperate struggle to feed and clothe Hannah and her siblings did not leave her enough time to indulge in playing with them as children. Eva gets angry and says:

... Everybody all right. 'Cept Mamma, Mamma the only one ain't all right. Cause she didn't *love* us."
... You settin' here with your healthy – ass self and ax me did I love you? Them big old eyes in your head would a been two holes full of maggots if I hadn't. (p.68)

Then Hannah asks her why she killed Plum. Eva begins to cry and says:

... When he came back from the war he wanted to get back in. After all that carryin' on, just gettin' him out and keepin' him alive, he wanted to crawl back in my womb and well... I ain't got the room no more even if he could do it. There wasn't space for him in my womb. And he crawlin' back. Being helpless and thinking baby thoughts and dreaming baby dreams and messing up his pants again and smiling all the time. I had room enough in my heart, but not in my womb, not no more. I birthed him once. I couldn't do it again. He was growed, a big old thing (p.71)

And she remembers the terror she felt at his life – threatening impacted bowel so

many years earlier. But this conversation between Eva and Hannah raises the ambiguity of a mother's love. There seem to be both constructive and destructive aspects of love. Hannah takes a nap in the front room and dreams of a wedding in a red bridal gown. She tells Eva about it, who is miles away distracted by the thoughts of her 13 years old granddaughter Sula's adolescent behavior. Later, Eva looks out her window in time to see Hannah's dress catch fire. Eva throws herself out of the window, hoping to cover Hannah's body with her own:

... Cut and bleeding she crawled the air trying to aim her body toward the flaming and dancing figure. She missed and came crashing down some twelve feet from Hannah's smoke stunned but still conscious, Eva dragged herself toward her firstborn, but Hannah, her senses lost, went flying out of the yard gesturing and bobbing like a sprung jack-in-the-box.... the water (splashed) did put out the flames, but it always made steam, which seared to stealing all that was left of the beautiful Hannah Peace Somebody covered her legs with a shirt. A woman unwrapped her head rag and placed it on Hannah's shoulder. Somebody else ran to Dick's Fresh Food and Sundries to call the ambulance... Then somebody remembered to go and see about Eva... Mother and daughter were placed on stretchers and carried to the ambulance. (pp. 76-77)

Hannah died on the way to the hospital. Eva is barely saved, by Old Willy Fields, an orderly, or she would have died of excess blood loss. But this old orderly was

cursed by Eva for years. Eva attributes Hannah's dream to a premonition of her death by fire; "... She remembered the wedding dream and recalled that wedding always meant death. And the red gown, well that was the fire, as she should have known" (p.76)

Eva suddenly recalls something else that she saw - Sula standing on the porch, watching her mother die:

...When Eva, who was never one to hide the faults of her children, mentioned what she thought she'd seen to a few friends, they said it was natural. Sula was probably struck dumb, as anybody would be who saw her own mamma burn up. Eva said yes, but inside she disagreed and remained convinced that Sula had watched Hannah burn not because she was paralyzed, but because she was interested. (p.78)

It may be a good thing that Hannah is not completely consumed with such love for Sula. Although Sula was hurt to learn that her mother did not like her, Hannah's words free Sula to a certain extent, as Sula realizes that she does not have to become or do anything to gain her mother's love because Hannah loves her regardless. Eva tries to understand Hannah's tragic accident by attaching special significance to the heat wave, Hannah's dream as well to her missing comb.

Moreover Hannah died by fire just as Plum did. May be, this is the price Eva pays for intentionally killing Plum. Eva condemns Sula for standing motionless while Hannah died by fire. She attributes her inability to correctly read the signs of disorder in time to Sula's fretful adolescent behaviour; she did not read the warning in Hannah's

dream because Sula distracted her and she failed to save her daughter. She attempts to define Sula as the source and origin of her inability to impose order on chaos. In the years that followed, the community of the Bottom did exactly the same thing.

Nel broke her promise to define the boundaries of her own identity by choosing to marry young just as her mother had. A marriage is supposed to be a happy event; however Jude (Nel's husband) chooses marriage as the inferior alternative to what he really wants: a man's job. Nel basically fulfils Helene's expectations by marrying rather than fulfilling her own plan to live a wonderful adventurous and exciting life on her own terms. In the end Helene succeeded in filing away the rough, unconditional edges from Nel's personality. The marriage thus symbolizes the reduction of possibilities. It signals a narrowing of the personalities of the people involved. It also heralds Nel's and Sula's separation from one another. Sula herself was quite excited about Nel's marriage:

As for Nel ... During all of her girlhood the only respite Nel had had from her stern and undemonstrative parents was Sula. When Jude began to hover around, she was flattered – all the girls liked him – and Sula made the enjoyment of his attentions keener simply because she seemed always to want Nel to shine. They never quarrelled, these two, the way some girlfriends did over boys... In those days a compliment to one was a compliment to the other, and cruelty to one was a challenge to the other. (pp. 83-84)

Nel was different from Sula, may be this was what made them perfect together:

Nel's response to Jude's shame and anger selected her away from Sula. And greater than her friendship was this new feeling of being needed by someone who saw her singly. She didn't even know she had a neck until Jude remarked on it, or that her smile was anything but the spreading of her lips until he saw it as a small miracle. (p.84)

Nel being so close to Jude realized how important she is, at least for this one man, she is the world:

Nel and Jude, who had been the stars all during the wedding, were forgotten finally as the reception melted into a dance, a feed, a gossip session, a playground and a love nest. For the first time that day they relaxed and looked at each other, and liked what they saw

As if reading her thoughts, Jude leaned and whispered, "Me too."... Even from the rear Nel could tell that it was Sula and that she was smiling; that something deep down in that liveness was amused. It would be ten years before they saw each other again, and their meeting be thick with birds. (p.85)

After Nel's wedding Sula leaves her home to return to the Bottom accompanied by a; "plague of robins." (p.89) Her expensive, stylish clothing startles her old neighbors. When she visits Eva, their encounter quickly becomes antagonistic, as Eva criticizes her for remaining spinster. Eva said; "Well, don't let your mouth start nothing that your ass can't stand. When you gone to get married? You need to have

some babies. I'll settle you." To this Sula answered rudely; "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself." (p.92)

Sula decided to remain single by choice as Eva and Hannah But Eva said, they remained single not by choice but due to their misfortune as BoyBoy left Eva and Hannah's husband Rekus died when Sula was three years old. Angered by Eva's judgmental statements, Sula orders her to shut up. She says that Eva's decision to cut off her own leg in order to collect insurance does not give her the right to control other people's lives. Angered, Eva calls Sula a bad daughter and Sula accuses Eva of murdering Plum. Eva reminds Sula that it was she who killed Hannah, over this Sula threatens to kill Eva, the way she killed Plum. Frightened Eva keeps her doors locked at night. Not long afterwards, one day:

...two men came with a stretcher and she didn't even have time to comb her hair before they strapped her to a piece of canvas.

When Mr. Buckland Reed came to pick the number his mouth sagged at the sight of Eva being carried out and Sula holding some papers against the wall, at the bottom of which, just above the word "guardian", she very carefully wrote Miss Sula Mae Peace. (p. 94)

Sula becomes the guardian and commits her to a nursing home, shocking the entire community. They decide that Sula is truly evil, though Sula tells Nell that she put Eva in a home because she was afraid of her. Eva always criticized Sula for her independence. Perhaps Eva's strange reversal of attitudes derives from her need

to contain what she perceived as Sula's influence in Hannah's death. Eva and Hannah were never considered a social threat but Sula was, by the entire community.

Sula and Nel begin to once more spend time together. One day when Jude returns home and complains to Nel about some minor annoyance at his job, Sula teases him. Irritated, he comments that her birthmark looks like a snake. This early animosity, though, eventually leads to an affair. After Nel discovers the affair by stumbling over Jude and Sula having sex:

But they had been down on all fours naked, not touching except their lips right down there on the floor where the tie is pointing to, on all fours (uh huh, go on, say it) like dog. Nibbling at each other, not even touching, not even looking at each other, just their lips, and when I opened the door they didn't even look for a minute and I thought the reason they are not looking up is because they are not doing that. So it's just all right. I am just standing here... but they are not really doing it. But then you did look up or you did. You did Jude... And finally you just got up and started putting on your clothes and your privates were hanging down, so soft, and you buckled your pants... She was sitting there on the bed not even bothering to put on her clothes... I was worried about you not knowing that your fly was open and scared too because your eyes looked like the soldiers' that time on the train my mother turned to custard

... And then you walked past me saying, "I'll be back for my things."
And you did but left your tie. (pp. 105-106)

Until now Jude's tie had always proved his presence at home and signified, he hadn't left for anywhere and is just around. Jude abandons Nel and their children; Nel is devastated by the betrayal of her husband and best friend. Sula breaks social conventions twice in this section; first when she puts Eva in a nursing home, and again when she has an affair with Nel's husband. Her unpredictable behavior frightens the already suspicious community of the Bottom. In order to contain and understand their fear, they label her "evil". Like Eva, they impose order on her influence by imposing connections on seemingly unrelated events. The "plague of robins" becomes an evil omen of her return.

Sula's total disregard for the social rules governing marriage nearly destroys Nel. As a result of his extramarital affair, Jude abandons his family for good. Although Sula's actions are selfish yet the society need not to define her "evil" as putting the burden of blame on Sula's shoulders that she destroyed Nel's marriage is rather superficial; after all, Jude also chose to take part in the affair, and it was he who chose to leave his family. Sula never forced him to leave his family. Only because Sula decides on staying back in the Bottom, the community finds it much easier to concentrate their antagonism on her.

Nel's devastation is partly because of her own weak sense of self she always viewed her marriage as a combination of two halves of the same kind, she thought Jude and she were so perfect together, just made for each other kind. Now she cannot even cry after the end of her marriage. She did everything social conventions demanded, but still she was abandoned by her

husband. The only question which kept on ringing in Nel's mind and soul was; ... "Why me?" ... (p. 108) she waited for a cry to come from the bottom but nothing came.

The community contemplates over the plague of robins, which preceded Sula's return, and the story about her reaction to Hannah's fatal accident. They decide that the birthmark that Sula had over her eye represents Hannah's ashes. They are even more horrified that she has slept with White men. As the community's animosity and hatred towards Sula grow, their definition of her being evil needs to be justified. Sula disregards their feeling of hatred and continues living as she fancies. Their horror at Sula's sexual affairs with White men reflects the extent to which racial segregation defines their lives and psychology:

But it was the men who gave her the final label, who fingerprinted her for all time. They were the ones who said she was guilty of the unforgivable thing – the thing for which there was no understanding, no excuse, no compassion They said that Sula slept with white men. It may not have been true, but it certainly could have been. She was obviously capable of it....

Every one of them imagined the scene, each according to his own predilections – Sula underneath some white man and it filled them with choking disgust. There was nothing lower she could do, nothing filthier... They insisted that all unions between white men and black women be rape; for a black woman to be willing was literally unthinkable. In that way, they regarded integration with precisely the same venom that white people did. (pp. 112-13)

Sula's affairs with White men give them a stronger sense of outrage against the interracial relationships, which actually are exploitative. Thus, her presence gives a strong sense of racial identity. Sula's frequent affairs are all fleeting. Although she doesn't know it, she has sex because it opens her to loneliness and sadness:

... The men who took her to one or another of those places had merged into one large personality: the same language of love, the same entertainments of love, the same cooling of love. Whenever she introduced her private thoughts into their rubbings or goings, they wooed their eyes. She taught her nothing but love tricks, shared nothing but worry, gave her nothing but money. She had been looking all along for a friend, and it took her a while to discover that a lover was not a comrade and could never be – for a woman. (pp. 120-21)

The community starts attributing different accidents to Sula, for example, when Mr. Finley chokes to death on a chicken bone when he sees Sula, she is the source of his demise. When Teapot, a neglected, malnourished child, accidentally falls off Sula's porch, Teapot's mother accuses Sula of pushing him.

Ironically enough, the community labeling of Sula as evil actually improves their own lives. Her presence in the society gave them an impetus to live harmoniously together. Teapot's mother, once a negligent parent, begins to care for her son as a result of her hatred for Sula. Women started loving and cherishing their husbands:

Sula was trying them out and discarding them without any excuse the men could swallow. So the women, to justify their own judgement, cherished their men more, soothed the pride and vanity Sula had bruised. (p. 115)

The residents of Bottom got a stronger sense of collective identity and strength due to Sula's presence. Although the community regards her as an evil person, her return to the Bottom is actually far more than it appears to be it's actually a blessing disguise. Sula says:

She was a pariah, then and knew it Love making seemed to her, at first creation of special kind of joy. She thought she liked the sootiness of sex and its comedy: ... Sexual aesthetics bored her. Although she did not regard sex as ugly (ugliness was boring also), she like to think of it as wicked.... When she left off cooperating with her body and began to assert herself in the act, particles of strength gathered in her like steel sharing drawn to a spacious magnetic centre, forming a tight cluster that nothing, it seemed, could break. And there was utmost irony and outrage in lying under someone, in a position of surrender, feeling her own ability strength and limitless power. (pp. 122-23)

Morrison has used the term *pariah*, which means an outcast or a despised person or animal. It ironically fits on Sula, too perfectly.

Ajax takes an interest in Sula because she is so unpredictable. He is "nice" to his lovers, and they frequently fight over him, but he finds all his lovers boring. He and

Sula have a passionate affair, enjoying one another's independence for the first time in her life; Sula experiences the desire for possession of her lover. When Ajax senses her new domestic impulse, he abandons the relationship. Sula is devastated by his abandonment; "Sula discovers what possession was not love; perhaps but possession or at least the desire for it she was astounded by so new and alien a feeling." (p. 131)

Sula's relationship with Ajax opens her to new feelings; she discovers the possessive nature of love. Earlier, she condemned Nel for confronting to the web of conventional social expectations, yet she herself is seduced by the promise of security that her love with Ajax seems to offer. Her ultimately negative experience with Ajax seems to confirm her suspicion that she will never have the close security in a relationship with a man that she had in her friendship with Nel. In this comparison rests an implicit contrast between the love that exists between women and that which women can find with men. Ajax love, to Sula seemed unreal:

Every now and then she looked around for tangible evidence of his having ever been there. Where were the butterflies? the blueberries? the whistling reed ? she could find nothing, for he had left nothing but his stunning absence....

...His absence was everywhere, stinging everything, giving the furnishings primary colors, sharp outlines to the corners of rooms and gold light dust collecting on table tops.... things seemed to exist because of him, backdrops to his presence....

Then one day, burrowing in a dresser, she found what she had been looking for: proof that he had been there, his driver's license...." (pp. 134-35)

After setting eyes on his driver's license, Sula came to know how much less she knew about Ajax whose name was actually A. Jacks and she thought it was Ajax. She felt their separation was inevitable as the woman to whom, he was making love even didn't know his name properly.

When Sula falls seriously ill, Nel decides to go and see her for the first time in three years. Nel thinks of herself as a "good woman", and takes pride in that fact. When she goes to see the seriously ill Sula, she feels that her generous action makes her see herself as the betrayed party and Sula as the traitor. She is blinded like the community, who cannot see that it was Jude who abandoned his family and Sula is not entirely to blame. Nel asks Sula if she can do anything for her. Sula says she could get her medicines from the drug store. Nel when came back in spite of all, musters up enough courage and ask her – why did you slept with Jude? In the resulting conversation, both the friends discuss the topics of morality and obligation. Nel says:

You can't do it all. You a woman and a colored woman at that. You can't act like a man. You can't be walking around all independent – like, doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don't.

Sula says, what she thinks about men; "Then I really would act like what you call a man. Every man I ever knew left his children." (p.143) Sula has denies Nel's

assertion that Black women can't afford to be alone and independent. She declares that every woman she knows is dying slowly; "Dying. Just like me. But the difference is they dying like a stump. Me, I'm going down like one of those redwoods. I sure did live in this world." (p.143)

Sula declares that her loneliness is her own while Nel's loneliness is inflicted upon her. Before Nel leaves Sula calls:

"Hey, girl." ...

"How you know?" Sula asked

"Know what?" Nel still wouldn't look at her.

"About who was good. How you know it was you?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean maybe it wasn't you. Maybe it was me." (p.146)

This question put up by Sula made a far greater impact on Nel. In Nel's mind, their close, wonderful friendship prior to the affair has been thrown in question. Wracked with pain, Sula ponders over the past. She remembers that she was thrilled when she saw her mother burning and thinks that all emotions, actions and words are just "something to do."

That's the same sun I looked at when I was twelve, the same pear trees.... I didn't mean anything. I never meant anything. I stood there watching her burn and was thrilled. I wanted her to keep on jerking like that, to keep on dancing. (p.147)

Sula curls into a fatal position and puts her thumb in her mouth. She notices suddenly that she has stopped breathing:

Then she realized, or rather sensed, that there was not going to be any pain. She

was not breathing because she didn't have to. Her body did not need oxygen. She was dead.

Sula felt her face smiling "Well, I'll be damned", she thought, "It didn't even hurt. Wait'll I tell Nel." (p.149)

Sula's last living thoughts are about Nel, the one person besides Ajax who aroused her curiosity. She wants to share her revelation with Nel that death doesn't actually hurt. Again, the novel proposes that things are not always as they seem; 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 milked all the experiences she can out of life.

The community of the Bottom regards Sula's death as a good omen. They go the burial to verify for themselves that the "witch" is indeed in the ground. Initially it seems to herald good things. There were rumors that Black workers will be hired for the construction of the tunnel under the river. There were even plans to build a new nursing home, which will house both Black and White patients.

However, a devastating frost overtakes the area destroying crops and killing livestock. Many people cannot even get into Medallion, so they lose several days of much needed wages. The bitter cold snap brings in its wake a host of illness. The influence of "evil" Sula now seems to fade away; moral righteousness crumbled, Teapot's mother beats him furiously after he refused to eat some food she has made for him. Wives cease to cherish their husbands as they did when Sula was alive.

The weather finally warms on New Year's Day. The night before National Suicide Day, Shadrack begins to feel lonely for the

first time since he came back from World War I. Only Sula had come to his house. He fondles the belt, which provides an evidence of her presence once. It was when she a frightened and crying child had come to his door, years ago, and the tadpole birthmark over her eye had signalled him that she was a friend. She seemed to want to ask him a question. And he could only muster up enough courage to say "Always" just in order to allay the fear of change and gave her a promise of permanence. Suddenly, Shadrack doesn't want to celebrate National Suicide Day. After seeing Sula's dead body with the same tadpole mark above the eye, he realized how wrong he was as there is no "Always". Nevertheless he gathers his implements the next morning and proceeds with his annual ritual. Many of Bottom's residents, including the Deweys, follow him. They walk to the tunnel where they begin to vandalize the construction site because the jobs have again been denied to Black workers. Suddenly, it collapses and many of Shadrack's followers, including the Deweys, drown.

In 1965, Nel reflects on the changes she has seen in her lifetime. The Black community of the Bottom has slowly moved into the once all-White city of Medallion to build homes with their wartime wealth. Job prospects have improved, but she laments the loss of community, which characterized the Bottom. People, now live in isolated household rather than as a collective whole. The Bottom has now become a haven of rich Whites, Jude left Nel and children now settled in their lives, there is nothing left for Nel.

Nel goes to the new place where old people are kept:

... There were just nine colored women out there, the same nine that had been there in the other one. But a lot of white ones. White people didn't fret about putting their old ones away. It took a lot for black people to let them go, and even if somebody was old and alone, others did the dropping by, the floor washing, the cooking. Only when they go crazy and unmanageable were they let go (pp. 164-65)

Unless and until it was somebody like Sula, wicked and mean. Eva, felt Nel was though foolish but was not evil to be kept under lock. Nel visits Eva in the nursing home, but she is confronted with a sad, shrivelled woman, a shadow of the vibrant matriarch, Eva once was. Their conversation is rambled because Eva has gone senile. During their odd talk, Eva accuses Nel of killing Chicken Little. Nel tries to blame the death entirely on Sula, but Eva reminds her that she watched. She doesn't think there is a difference between Sula and Nel's role because they are "just alike", this disturbed Nel; "Just alike. Both of you. Never was no difference between you" (p. 169) Nel is disturbed as Eva addressed her, Sula. She wondered if what town people and Sula said about Eva, being mean was right. But of course Nel shared some of the guilt for the boy's death. She remembers feeling thrilled when Chicken Little slipped from Sula's hands.

Nel visits the cemetery where Eva's children and Sula are buried when she exits the cemetery, saw Shadrack "... A little shaggier, a little older, still energetically mad, he looked at the woman hurrying along the road with the sunset in

her face." (p.173) He stopped trying to recall, who she was. Nel Whispered Sula:

"Sula?" she whispered, gazing at the top of trees "Sula?"

Leaves stirred; mud shifted; there was the small of overripe green things. A soft ball of fur broke and scattered like dandelion spores in the breeze.

"All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude." And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up in her throat. "We was girls together," She said as though explaining something. "O Lord, Sula" she cried, "girl, girl, girlgirlgirl."

It was a fine cry – loud and long - but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow. (p.174)

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 positives of Sula, Nel is able to mourn for herself, for the sacrifices she made to gain social acceptance, which Sula defined herself by refusing.

Toni Morrison's writing *Sula* is emotional, dark and clear. The novel is filled with immense tragedy and memorable characters. Morrison's ability to be specific while describing the universal aspects of a small town life, the often catty women it tends to foster, and a friendship struggling to survive in this environment is what makes her both profound and accessible.

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