Sula: A Critical Narrative of Black Feminism

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Abstract: Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973) presents a profound exploration of Black womanhood, female identity, friendship and resistance within the social and cultural structures of African American society. This paper examines *Sula* through the theoretical framework of Black feminism, focusing on the interconnected forms of oppression produced by race,gender and class. Through the lives of *Sula* Peace and Nel Wright, Morrison challenges conventional notions of feminity, morality, marriage and social conformity. This study argues that *Sula* functions as a critical narrative of Black feminism by questioning oppressive social conventions and emphasising the importance of self-definition, agency and sisterhood. Ultimately, Morrison;s novel contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities of Black female identity and the ongoing struggle for autonomy, recognition and empowerment.

Key Words: Black feminism, Black womanhood, female identity, patriarchy, sisterhood, resistance, female autonomy.

Black feminism is introduced as a challenging part to the premise of White feminism regarding their prerogative to speak for all women in general. The central debate of feminism is that of the equality and difference debate. This difference debate presupposes its broader significance in relation to the issue of race, class, sexuality and others. Mainstream feminists have often been accused of paying less importance or no importance at all to these differences in their trends and tendencies to universalise their analysis and resolution of the oppression of women. The multifariousness of feminism in its attitude, outlook and practice impels an interrogation into the generalising tendencies of First and Second wave feminism. These movements were influenced by white, middle-class women who ignored the concerns and experiences of black women and working class-women.

Black feminism was introduced as a history of activism. Some notable activists were Maria Stewart, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Rosa Parks and others.

The black women had participated in the suffrage movement. They tried hard to expose the connection between racism and sexism as the means of white male dominance. The first wave feminism stayed in the area of white, middle-class and educated women. Black feminism has expressed the voice of black women and for them no voice is raised by mainstream white women feminists. They have argued that the point of race was never a point of interest of white feminist's movement. Their demand is that the issues of black women were marginalised and the white women of the United States always keep the issues behind the larger periphery of hegemonic discourse. The black feminists presuppose their suppression and oppression which is based on gender, race and class. They also have criticised the black patriarchal structure. They examine the history of the slavery system in terms of economic exploitation, income, resources and sexual exploitation of black women.

There is a history of Black feminism of its own. Black Women are classified on the basis of nation, ethnicity, class and others. So, the history of black women is full of many experiences. It is quite interesting to discuss the different activities of black women. The symbol of true womanhood remains delicate, fragile, dependent, docile and homely. The lives of African- American women as workers outside home are dammed to be a subhuman inferior creatures and it complicates the gender empowerment construction by Euro-centric models. In the Women's Convention held in Akron, Ohio in 1851, Sojourner Truth delivered a strong speech. She emphasises her 'difference' as an ex-slave black woman and opposes the model of gender in which Euro-American women were both confined and nourished. Truth says:

Nobody ever helps me into carriage, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a

woman? ... I have borne thirteen children and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman? (Web n.p.)

The emergence of black feminist movement occurred from the dissatisfaction of the Civil Rights movements and white feminist movement in the 1960s and 70s. Critics like Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith explain the intersectionality of black women in the discourse of the Civil Rights movement and the contemporary feminist movement .The civil Rights movement mainly addressed the issues of the oppression of black men and the contemporary feminist movement puts the focus on the specific problems of white women. The main focused issues of the black feminists were to gain their own identity in African-American culture which was essentially patriarchal. In 1973 the NBFO (National Black Feminist Organisation) was founded and its main address was directed towards the issues of race and gender which were central to the development of black feminism's consciousness.

This Black feminist criticism challenges the narrow boundaries of the traditional Western model of theory building. Gloria Jean Watkins better known as bell hooks, the American author, feminist and social activist points out that black feminist criticism tries to enlarge the dialogue about the nature of black women's experience that commenced in nineteenth century America to proceed beyond racists and sexist assumptions about the nature of womanhood. Eminent social scientist Patricia Hill Collins, the writer of *Black Feminist Thought knowledge, consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990) puts emphasis on experience that it is very important in understanding and critiquing the lives of Black women.

Thus the analysis is a very important point to be discussed in the lives of the African-American women. Barbara Smith shows the interlocking politics of sex and race in the works of black women writers. Smith in her famous work "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism" puts emphasis on the necessity of the fusion of black feminist criticism and black feminist political movement. Her approach takes a major shift from the earlier works of Mary Helen Washington as the latter is less bothered to provide any black feminist critical perspective but emphasised on the inspection of unimportant and less cared texts by black women writers. According to Smith:

The use of Black women's language and cultural experiences in books by Black women about Black women results in a miraculously rich coalescing of form and content and also takes their writing far beyond the confines of white/ male literary structures. The Black feminist critic would find innumerable commonalities in works by Black Women. (Smith, 417)

Hazel Carby in her famous work, *Reconstructing Womanhood: the Emergence of the Afro-American Women Novelist* (1987) recapitulates some the previous structures established by the predecessors of black feminists criticism and questions the essentialising presuppositions made about black feminism. She lays emphasis on the underlying racism in the Suffrage Movement and examines the works of black women writers. These works are regarded as the document of culture and politics which form an intellectual tradition. She also provides an interesting elucidation on the revolutionary, rebellious potential of Women Blues artists .She is also of the same opinion that racism and sexism are interconnected, but stresses the importance establishing historically specific forms of this interface.

Black women writers like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Gwendolyn Brooks, Maya Angelou have excellently represented black women who are at the centre of the enriched ideologies of race, class and gender. Bell hooks puts emphasis on the marginality as an organisation of resistance and repression. She condemnens the racism, classism and sexism. According to bell hooks, "while White women's organisations could concentrate their attention on the general reform measures, Black women had to launch a campaign to defend their 'virtue'." (Hooks, 165)

Toni Morrison is another well-known persona in the history of African-American literature and feminism. She was born in the small town of Lorain, Ohio where racial oppression and segregation on the basis of class and too much hostility was not pervasive. This kind of atmosphere generated a sensitive attitude within Morrison towards the grappling masses in general and the people of whole Africa in particular. But in her lifetime she witnessed and expressed enough poverty, hatred, racial oppression and segregation. Morrison's novels are wonderful epitomes of African-American culture. Through her novels, Toni Morrison draws the scattered

scenario of the social history of African-American which is disintegrated by a historical past of disconnections and estrangement. Her novels depict the sufferings and deprivation of black people within the social order where racism prevails.

Through the characters of her novels she tries to explore the black identities especially the black females in the white America. Morrison tries to find the resolution of the contradictions deep rooted in her African-American identity. She becomes conscious of the marginalisation within the mainstream context and commences to give importance to her outermost existence. It is claimed that Morrison is concerned with the idea of being a Black women writer belonging to Black community- a community with changes. According to Morrison, African-American identity is replete with continuous change, movement and the contradictions. So it is natural that her novels are the survey of the meaning of blackness which means to be black in White America. It also puts significance on the identity of a black woman in male-dominated hegemonic society in White America, the belief on the indigenous African culture in a world that only supports Eurocentric culture and the struggle for existence in a world where black people have their insignificant existence. Her works are the beautiful documentation from shattered past of slavery life to painful frustrating present. Morrison's novels are based on racism, sexism, classism which are the constraints in the society and psychology. In her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), the main focus is on racism. Unlike her first novel, in her second novel *Sula* (1973), Morrison hasn't presented the issues from feminist's perspective. She puts emphasis on race, gender and class and shows how these can affect black people's lives specially the lives of Black women. Through the protagonist of the novel, *Sula*, Morrison eulogises the strength of black women not merely showing that they are the victims of race, gender and class.

Sula, Morrison's second novel appeared in 1973 breaks the stereotypical image of a black woman appeared in the Western Literature. *Sula* is one among the few black heroines who deliberately rejects all kinds of standardized norms of behaviour and focuses solely on herself. The concept of good and evil is beautifully presented by Morrison which is related to societal definitions of women .The Black community, "Bottom" is the symbol of black womanhood whose distinguished characteristics are to manage the household, bear and rear children and to support the male members either emotionally or financially .*Sula* is fundamentally a novel of women which critically discusses the feeling, affair and the roles which are assumed by the women either deliberately or forcefully. *Sula* denotes the fortunes of black women in two matriarchal households and shows how their lives represent different possibilities of choices of black women in White America.

The beginning of the novel with the description of the neighbourhood called the "Bottom" is very suggestive. As the name "Bottom" itself suggests the lowest point or part of something, the hint is clear that this place is meant for the black people who have a poor and meaningless existence in White America. It is not a part of the town, Medallion, but just a neighbourhood where the Negroes lived. It is important to note that we can see how the people of the Bottom used to hear singing or see dancing as if they are so happy. These are the masks so that the outsiders never can look deep enough to realise their pain behind the masked face.

The two contrasted households of the Bottom are presented beautifully throughout the novel. On the one hand, there is Nel Wright who is considered to be the protagonist of the novel is raised by her mother Helene Wright. Nel's family deeply believes in the social conventions. Morrison has presented Nel's mother, Helen as a conventional lady who likes to abide by the rules of African-American society. As Morrison depicts-

> Since there was no Catholic church in Medallion then, she joined the most conservative black church. And held sway. It was Helene who never turned her head in church when latecomers arrived; Helene who established the practice of seasonal altar flowers; Helene who introduced the giving of banquets of welcome to returning Negro veterans. She lost only one battle- the pronunciation of her name. The people in the Bottom refused to say Helene. They called her Helen Wright and left it at that. (Morrison, 18)

The notable point is that the Wright household's belief in church and religion, if there was a Catholic church in Medallion then Helene would surely join in that church instead of the black church. So the Wright household likes to remain within the archetypal structure of the African- American society and they want to play the role of 'good'.

Helen's grandmother wants her to stay away from the Sundown House because she is afraid of the "Wild Blood" of her mother Rochelle who had worked as a prostitute, the only unconventional woman in her family. So they accept the marriage proposal of Wiley Wright, who was a seaman. Marriage was the best possible way for Helene to escape from the uneasy atmosphere of Sundown House. It can be said in another way that these two women (Helene's grandmother and Helene) forced Wiley Wright to ask the hand of Helene for marriage. Morrison states-

So when Wiley Wright came to visit his Great Aunt Cecile in New Orleans, his enchantment with the pretty Helene became a marriage proposal-under the pressure of both women. He was a seaman (or rather a lakeman, for he was a ship's cook on one of the Great Lakes lines), in port only three days out of every sixteen. (Morrison, 17)

Helene shifted to Medallion along with her husband. She adjusts very well in that environment. She is very much proper and classy in that particular atmosphere. After nine years of her marriage her daughter Nel is born. She brings up her daughter as an obedient, polite and unimaginative daughter.She is fond of life and is happy because they are far away from the Sundown House.

On the other hand, *Sula* Peace lives in her grandmother's house. She lives in a house of many rooms and many more rooms, doors and stoops has been built over a period of five years. The constructional features of the Peace household are different from the others. As Morrison herself says-

Sula Peace lived in a house of many rooms that had been built over a period of five years to the specifications of its owner, who kept on adding things: more stairways- there were three sets to the second floor- more rooms, doors and stoops. There were rooms that had three doors, others that opened out on the porch only and were inaccessible from any other part of the house; others that you could get to only by going through somebody's bedroom. (Morrison, 30)

The Multilayered and multicoloured household of Peace signifies the multilayered thoughts and characteristics of the habitants of the household.

Sula's grandmother Eva and her mother Hannah both are considered as eccentric and loose. Their big house is also considered as eccentric and loose. Their big house also serves as homes for three boys and boarders, friends, strays- all are welcome in the house. So this is the chaotic atmosphere as exactly opposite to that of Nel's where *Sula* has grown up. In spite of these differences and opposite upbringing, *Sula* and Nel have become very good friends and closely attached with each other in their teenage. They join the same school, meet in the playground and their opposite traits of personality and appearance introduce a sudden and intense relationship. Nel is light skinned, consistent and strong, *Sula* is dark with uncertain emotions. Many strange incidents happen during this period of time. A traumatic accident has taken place in the Bottom. One neighbourhood boy named Chicken Little was drowned by *Sula* unintentionally while swimming in the nearby river. *Sula* and Nel both are the eye witnesses to that incident but they never expose the truth about the accident to anyone. After this traumatic incident, Nel quickly decides to embrace the image of goodness and decides to settle down with Jude and becomes a conventional African-American woman. But *Sula* remains unchanged after the incident-

Sula simply cried. Soundlessly and with no heaving and gasping for breath, she let the tears roll into her mouth and slide down her chin to dot the front of her dress. (Morrison, 65

On the other hand, Hannah, *Sula*'s mother asks her mother, Eva if she really loves her children and she also wonders why Eva murders Plum, in reply Eva says that she just wants to give him an honourable death. Meanwhile, one day Hannah gets burn in an accident while she is trying to light a fire outside the house. Eva tries her best to save her daughter but fails and Hannah dies on the way to hospital. *Sula* also witnesses the incident but she is quiet to this. The other inhabitants of the Bottom think that perhaps *Sula* is stunned by the incident but Eva has the belief that she just stands and watches because she is interested. Morrison says-

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. (Morrison, 78)

Eva has that particular realisation that Hannah's careless attitude towards her child, *Sula* from her childhood is one of the main reasons for the distaste created in *Sula*'s mind for her mother.

After the high school Nel gets married to the Jude Greene and it is a grand affair at her maternal house. Jude Greene is popular enough in the community and works as a waiter at the Hotel Medallion. He plans to get married when he realises that he is unable to get a new job. The gang boss always ignores the capability of black men who are trying their best to get the job only for the less qualified white men. This causes a disappointment to Jude who wants to do something new than merely to serve the job of a waiter.

The atmosphere of Medallion changes when *Sula* returns to Medallion after ten years. *Sula*'s behaviour, appearance, body language catches the eyes of everyone even the white people. *Sula* and Eva have changed arguments on several topics such as *Sula*'s odd behaviour and eccentric nature, Eva's murder of plum, *Sula*'s non-cooperation in Hannah's fire accident and some others. Nel observes a new excitement in her life and in the neighbourhood after *Sula*'s return to Medallion. In course of time, *Sula* has become an evil spirit in the whole neighbourhood. They begin to spread nasty comments and rumours about *Sula* and what she had done to Eva, Nel and Jude. They also begin to talk that *Sula* has watched her mother to get burnt and she has numerous love affairs in her life along with the white men. People take her as a witch with evil spirit and observe her closely. In spite of all these fears and hatred, the inhabitants of the Bottom somehow begin to feel safe in *Sula*'s presence; a hidden harmony embraces the whole surrounding of Medallion. Morrison depicts-

> In spite of their fear, they reacted to an oppressive oddity, or what they called evil days, with an acceptance that bordered on welcome. Such evil must be avoided, they felt, and precautions must naturally be taken to protect themselves from it. But they let it run its course, fulfil itself, and never invented ways either to alter it, to annihilate it or to prevent its happening again. So also were they with people. (Morrison, 89-90)

Nel pays a visit to *Sula* in three years and wants to help her as she is sick. Nel feels the same strong emotion towards *Sula* as it is earlier. *Sula* gets the assurance that Nel will help her while she is sick because she always stands by *Sula* when she is in need or is in crisis. Later Nel breaks their friendship when she comes to know that *Sula* has an illicit affair with her husband Jude Greene. After *Sula*'s death many people attend her funeral to see the burial of the "witch". The Bottom people begin to see new hope and they notice that things in general are going on smoothly. Years after the death of *Sula*, Nel realises that her friendship with *Sula* is transcendental. Nel also regrets that she also always thinks *Sula* is the main cause for her misery instead of Jude. She also visits the grave of *Sula* and cries out for her. She has the realisation that she is actually missing her friend and not her husband.

Morrison's second novel, *Sula* (1973) essentially gives a concrete shape to the new black feminity that sets aside all the opponents between past and present, individual and community which construct Black Aesthetic discourse. It represents both the aims of the Black Freedom Movements and Women's Liberation in a combination. It also presents the combination of feminism and nationalism by encountering these two ideologies contradictorily. It follows a double move and vacillates between these two ideologies. The vacillation between these two ideologies should cast down any programmatic political reading; however, this novel is often read as a feminist novel. *Sula* promotes the feminist argument that black women are victimised in the roles which society allows them. It focuses more on the sexual constraints than the racial constraints on the Black women. There are several other elements which draw attention towards the feminist reading, for example its presentation of black men, institution of heterosexuality and reproduction critically. However, a closer examination of these elements reveals the counter pressure applying by Black Nationalist ideology on a feminist articulation of black feminity. Predictably, Black Nationalist critics reject the feminist elements of *Sula*, focusing their assessment of the novel's extremely hostile portrayal of black men. Famous critic Addison Gayle (1979) asserts that the feminist intentions of this novel necessarily fail because it is not easy to criticise severally the black men without criticising the black women. Therefore, we can find that both the images of men and women are equally disgusting in *Sula*. (Web)

Several other critics emphasised that the novel's feminist focus assumes a severe symbolic destruction of the Black male psyche and it is destroying the collective male ego psychologically. All the male characters in the novel except Ajax brighten the type that the Black Aestheticians want to dispel from black literature. The

names of characters like Chicken Little, Boy Boy and the Deweys present an image of black men as preserved in a state of unending, irresponsible childhood. The restricted physical growth of the Dewey Boys who remain boys for ever is equivalent to Plum's psychological denial of adulthood. The emasculation of black male characters in the novel seems to be equalized by the strength of some of the novel's black women characters, such as Eva and *Sula*.

It is clear that white men are responsible for the emasculation of black men. The way in which the character of Jude is presented clearly proves the racial oppression which is more powerful than the dominance of black female as the cause of black male emasculation. Jude's failure to get a meaningful job and to attain masculinity derives from his forced employment as a mere waiter and his disappointment to find any other meaningful work. The humiliation in the world of white people directly colours Jude's imagination of black women. Jude's dominating position in the household acts as the compensation for his humiliation in the workplace by white people; only by viewing his wife Nel at his beck and call. This dominance enables him to regain some attitude of adulthood. This novel formulates the black man as the object of racism who allots the subsidiary roles to the black women to heal their damaged masculinity. Almost all the female characters except *Sula* perform their both feminine and masculine jobs in the household. Nel willingly offers herself to fulfil the prescribed roles but *Sula* refuses to offer herself as a medium for the consolation of the woes of black men. *Sula* establishes a new image of black women by refusing the role of women of rural black community where women's roles are limited to mothers, warriors, witches and story tellers. She rejects the broken and victimised images of black men which are the results of racism. *Sula* puts aside the issues of racism and introduces a new assertion of black masculinity and feminity. *Sula*'s deliberate refusal to be the hem of black man's garment replaces the emphasis of masculinity of Black Nationalist discourse but her denial of Jude's victimised identity is similar to the aim of Black Nationalist to present a new black identity free from any suppressive and oppressive past .So the novel is particularly dealing with double moves, firstly, this novel applies a black feminist perspective to cut off the masculine emphasis which is one element of Black Nationalist ideology and then it gives support to the another element of Black Nationalist ideology which is the affirmation of new black identity.

Another important point of racist discrimination of African American women has been pointed out carefully by Morrison, that is, the lack of freedom of the African American females and especially their sexual freedom. All the female characters of the novel are lacking in whatsoever it be. Sexual freedom is interlinked with economic freedom and one cannot be achieved without the other. Hannah Peace has sexual freedom but she is economically dependent on anyone else. Eva Peace has to make her physical sacrifice for her economic freedom. Nel Wright is within the boundary of marriage protection. The neighbourhood accepts Hannah's behaviour because she doesn't have economic freedom. She is dependent on another woman. But *Sula* is seen by the towns people as a devouring evil although she has not done anything so horrible as her grandmother, Eva does, because she as an African American woman has exceeded the rules and regulations of African American society by getting sexually involved with white men. The interracial relation is regarded as a heinous crime for a black woman. Morrison wonderfully shows this point of discrimination in *Sula*-

> 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. The fact that their own skin colour was proof that it had happened in their own families was no deterrent to their bile. Nor was the willingness of black men to lie in the beds of white women a consideration that might lead them toward tolerance. 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. (Morrison, 113)

So the all pervasive presence of internal patriarchy in the lives of the black women creates another sub-boundary within the boundary for the existence of the black women. Through the character of *Sula*, Morrison breaks the stereotypical image of a black woman which has been thrust upon them by the society. Motherhood is another characteristic which is regarded as the stereotypical of a black woman. The multidimensional female characters of the novel establish the complex concept of motherhood. There is always a conflict and tension between the conventional and unconventional women. To begin with the discussion of Nel's family, it

is important to note that Nel's mother, Helene is born to a "Creole whore". So Helene is brought up by her grandmother under the perceived protection of religion. Religion is another tool of protection for Helene from the "wild blood" of her mother. Helene's grandmother, Cecile stands as the mother figure for Helene and her primary caretaker. Here Morrison challenges the concept of motherhood reinforcing the significance of the extended structure of a black family. Eva is the mother and guardian figure of the Peace household. She has sacrificed herself physically (her leg) in order to save her family economically. Mothering for Eva is the self-sacrifice and self-preservation. *Sula*'s mother Hannah possesses a careless attitude towards *Sula*; Hannah merely serves her duty to her daughter. Nel is particularly the guardian of her children especially after her husband, Jude's exit from the household. It is only, *Sula* who surpasses all the restricted images of the black women. She is different from others from the adolescent period and her odd behaviour begins to irk everybody-

Because she was thirteen, everybody supposed her nature was coming down, but it was hard to put up with her sulking and irritation. The birthmark over her eye was getting darker and looked more and more like a stem and rose. She was dropping things and eating food that belonged to the newly married couple and started in to worrying everybody... (Morrison, 74)

Sula rejects to embrace the motherhood which is not a unified whole. She makes it clear to Eva that she doesn't want to make anyone else; she only wants to live for herself and wants to do something for herself. *Sula* has that particular potential to fulfil her dreams and needs all by herself. Thus, Morrison urges the African American women to break the images imposed upon them and to establish a new definition of Black women, free from all the shackles.

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