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Defiance of Gender Norms and Traditional Morality: A Study of Toni Morrison's *Sula*

Suraya Jan

Research Scholar,
Department of English
Central University of
Kashmir, Srinagar

Abstract

Gone are the days when African-American literature was considered marginalized and inferior. It has the tendency of creating marvellous writers like Toni Morrison. Morrison is a novelist par excellence. She works hard to aware black people of their freedom and rights. *Sula* is one of the best novels of Morrison. Accentuating the quest of the black female self within the white racist and black sexist American society, the novel questions the biased portraiture of African-American women in the discourse of whites and black males. Sula Peace breaks the traditional norms of her society and emerges as a new woman defying all gender norms. Coming out of her subservient status, Sula demands her dignity in the community she lives in and creates a new identity for herself. The paper aims at pointing out how Morrison creates a character in her novel that defies all gender roles and traditional morality and emerges as a trendsetter setting a new direction for the women of her community.

Keywords- *Gender, Morality, Women, Community, Black*

Toni Morrison makes history by becoming the first African-American woman writer to receive Nobel Prize in Literature for her fiction in 1993. She emerges as a glamorous figure and champion of black female rights. Feminist themes like mother-daughter relationship, friendship between women, female self-realization, etc are central to her works. Blurring the boundaries between past and present, she revisions history and rebuts the erroneous postulates of Western society. Through her fiction, Morrison attempts to irradiate social and cultural conflicts and usher justice. She rewrites the history of her community which has otherwise hitherto been falsely written by the mainstream historians and rewrites it from black female perspective. Stressing on African Americans to know and understand their

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culture, she urges for creating a better future for her community. Morrison has indisputably evolved as a flourishing and triumphant black woman writer whose concern for her community is visible in her writings. Morrison's fiction has received ample amount of critical attention from the researchers and critics around the world. One sees different phases of Morrison's fiction. John Duvall remarks:

Morrison's fiction can be read in two distinct phases. Phase one runs from her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, through *Sula* and *Song of Solomon*, and culminates in *Tar Baby*; the second phase to date consists of her historical trilogy consisting of *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise*. What characterizes the former is Morrison's construction of a useable identity as an African-American woman novelist; what characterizes the latter is the author's working out the implications that follow from the recognition that identity may be more a construction than a biological essence. (8)

Sula (1973), Morrison's second novel focuses on the friendship between Sula Peace and Nel Wright, two young African-American girls growing up together and sharing their joys, experiences, and dreams. About the novel, Marie Nigro writes:

Sula celebrates many lives. It is the story of the friendship of the two African American women; it is the story of growing up Black and female; but most of all, it is the story of a community. Events that befall the denizens of the Bottom, a segregated community of mythical Medallion, Ohio, can be seen as those that might befall residents of any Black community in any town during the years of this narrative, 1919 to 1965. (15)

The novel revolves round Sula, the central character who wanders into various American cities and sets herself free to satisfy her own curiosity and freedom. Returning after ten long years, she observes that everything has changed and Nel has married and begot three children. Their friendship breaks because of the odd behaviour of Sula and her affair with Nel's husband, Jude. Sula emerges as a bold woman defying all the norms and moral traditions of her patriarchal society. Her family proves unconventional in every way. They seem to be at odds with traditional morality of their community. On the other hand, Nel's family is just the opposite of Sula's and adheres strictly to the conventionality and morality of their community. The friendship between the two girls is the crux of the plot. Against the set norms of her society where women are marginalized on the basis of race, gender, and class, Sula emerges as an empowered woman.

Eva Peace, Sula's grandmother is the master of her house. She raises her three children—two daughters and her son and conforms to the image of a father figure because her husband BoyBoy deserts her. She emerges to be the dominant maternal figure as people

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of various categories like tenants, stray people, newly-married couples, orphan children, etc come to live and take shelter in her house. Morrison describes her as a one-legged woman “who sat in a wagon on the third floor directing the lives of her children, friends, strays, and a constant stream of boarders” (*Sula* 30). Eva is the ruler of her own world and takes independent decisions hardly involving others in the policy of her decision making. Surpassing the traditional image of ‘mother,’ she sets her own son, Sweet Plum on fire because he was taking excessive amount of drugs. Once her daughter Hannah (Sula’s mother) asks her if she loves her children to which she replies: “I done everything I could to make him leave me and go on and live and be a man but he wouldn’t and I had to keep him out so I just thought of a way he could die like a man not all scrunched up inside my womb, but like a man” (*Sula* 72). In this way, she becomes both the giver as well as taker of her son’s life. She had undergone a great deal of melancholy.

Morrison describes Sula as: “Sula was a heavy brown with large quiet eyes, one of which featured a birthmark that spread from the middle of the lid toward the eyebrow . . .” (*Sula* 52). Sula once overhears Hannah saying that she loves Sula as a daughter but it doesn’t mean that she likes her so much. This reality detaches Sula from her mother and she does not save her when she got burned to death from the fire. Sula is more like Eva because she lives in her own way and takes decisions independently. Sula’s galloping on a horse just like an active prince exhibits her masculine tendencies. Sula displays her courage and fearlessness throughout. Her masculine tendency is exemplified through an incident which occurred to her during her school days. Once during a visit to their school, Nel and Sula are mocked and threatened by some boys and Sula takes a knife, cuts off part of her finger and tells them: “If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I’ll do to you?” (*Sula* 54-55). This clearly shows the tendency to reassert her power over others. Thus Sula is seen following the footsteps of her grandmother. Afro-American women were supposed to conform to the assigned gender roles. Sula, because of her courage and will, disregards the traditional womanhood. Knowing well that she will be discarded by her society, she still persists in her free and independent ways. She retains her freedom till the very end. She does not like to act like Nel who decides to combine her ‘me-ness’ into her husband’s self. When Ajax leaves her, she refuses to abandon her sovereignty and femaleness for him even though he believes in the equality of men and women.

Sandi Russel takes Sula as “one of the most thought-provoking and controversial heroines ever to emerge in American literature” (97). Sula has quite different views about sexuality. She takes men as simply the objects to be used and thrown out. Disregarding the morality of her Bottom community, she sleeps with white men and thus, enjoys interracial sex. She rejects the set norm of her community which says that a black woman must obey and

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submit herself to the patriarchal rule. Consequently, she is considered as evil in the male-dominated society. She is seen battling the male dominance, oppression, and authority from the very outset. Invincible and impregnable, she shows loose character and the society needs her despite her fault. It is only after her death that her importance is realized in her community. Morrison describes the situation of the community after her death as:

Now that Sula was dead and done with, they returned to a steeping resentment of the burdens of old people. Wives uncoddled their husbands; there seemed no further need to reinforce their vanity. And even those Negroes who had moved down from Canada to Medallion . . . returned to their original claims of superiority. (*Sula* 153-154)

Being ambitious, Sula lives in a world of her own imagination and emerges as a staunch feminist. She looks forward to putting an end to exploitation of black females in her society based on gender and race and hence challenges conventional gender roles. Nel warns Sula by saying, "You can't do it at all. You a woman and a colored woman at that. You can't act like a man" (*Sula* 142). Sula rebuts her by mapping her own course. In this way, Sula demurs the legacy where black women are falsely portrayed. Sula's confidence and belief in herself is also seen when she lies in her deathbed telling Nell, "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" (*Sula* 143) and finally dies in peace. Sula holds the opinion that men are not worth keeping for. Nel tells Sula that she finally is able to understand why Sula is not able to keep a man to which she replies, "They ain't worth more than me" (*Sula* 143).

Sula is authoritarian and sensuous, fights for her rights, and seeks equal status with men. She aspires to acquire masculine qualities like freedom to move anywhere, sexual freedom, feeling irresponsible, etc. Her heterosexual affairs make her realize that a lover can never be a friend. About marriages, she says, "those with husbands had folded themselves in starched coffins" (*Sula* 122). She decocts choice from choicelessness. She proves to be of upright status because she wants her community to breathe afresh and get renewed.

Snubbing all the fore begotten notions and conventions, she succeeds in establishing a new dawn of black female femininity and rejects the helplessness of African-American women by asserting an identity of her own. She enables herself to welcome and accept the estrangement from her society with an open heart affecting least her psyche. It is through Sula's character that Morrison relooks at the feminine values in a male dominated society. Her transgressiveness proves to be a biting and pungent blow on conventional roles and values based on gender. She springs up as a modern woman and emerges as a new face of black female in a patriarchal society. She accepts wholeheartedly her black colour and femininity. Submitting not to the patriarchy, she chooses her own destiny and leaves no option

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for society to reject her. It is she who awakens her society from deep slumber. Her death is seen as a liberating force which ultimately soothes and grants her peace. She discards all the conventional roles imposed upon her and emerges with a new sense of black female self. She emancipates herself from all the chains and celebrates her freedom. She strives to create a better present for herself completely breaking off with the past. Seeking female autonomy, she rejects all the roles assigned to her by community thereby constructs her own identity, and reinterprets gender and moral norms. She takes marriage as the worst form of subjugation and oppression of women where males completely dominate. Towards the end of the story, Nel's all misunderstandings about Sula get cleared and she realizes that she misses her more than Jude. She cried, "O Lord, Sula," she cried, girl, girl, girlgirlgirl" (*Sula* 174).

Toni Morrison is a pioneer and champion in Afro-American literature who stimulates black women to take pride in their blackness, womanhood, and culture and reject the negative images of their womanhood. She awakens black women about the illusion of white superiority. Morrison has clearly sketched the clear paradigm shift of the black community by contrasting Sula and her community. Morrison has skillfully created the character of Sula as a model of reorganizing black community to fight against the set conventions.

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