

Requisite of Feminal Adherence: Shadow of Shattered Relationships in Toni Morrison's *Sula*

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Abstract---*This study analyzes niceties and complexities of female bonding as exposed in Toni Morrison's Sula and also inspects the effect of gender, race and class on female's relationship. The novel conveys about how women face the difficulties flung by man centric foundations and its how cases the themes of motherhood, friendship and love. The study demonstrates the deep bonding that unfolds between Sula and Nel which was further tested by communal ethics. Nel was the most obedient character who did submit herself to the conventional nature and rule of society. Sula on the other hand was an unconventional character who was only concerned about herself and she was careless about society's-imposed law on women. These two contrastive ideologies made them part from each other. The novel Sula is really fascinating as it presents many strong female characters. Morrison always encourages women to form bonds with each other. The successful girlhood bonds help the women to build new identities, comfort and support each other during difficult times. The study conveys the message that female bonding can help in the survival of black community. It also proposes the need for female bonding as a way of fighting oppression. It focuses on the intensity of man-controlled society which establishes a risk to female bonding and more often that causes women's estrangement. The findings of this study emphasize and examines the recuperating powers of women bonding, which enables women to conquer obstacles and to broaden female kinship into female solidarity.*

Keywords---*female bonding, race, gender, oppression, black women*

I. INTRODUCTION

African American women faced three-fold oppression owing to their black colour, femininity and poverty. They were victims of class, race and gender inequality, oppressed not only by the white men and women but also by the black men belonging to their own community. Toni Morrison shows her deep concern for the oppressed black woman in her novel *Sula*. She delves into the internal and external conflicts of their lives which are rooted deeply in the socio-historical environment of which they constitute a part. In *Sula*, Morrison focuses her attention on the position of African American women within their own communities and studies the effect of patriarchy, marginalization and oppression. She also focuses her attention on the African American women relationships with men as well as other women. After portraying the pathetic condition of women during slavery in *The Bluest Eye* and in *Beloved*, Morrison continues to expound on a significant companionship between two women in *Sula*.

Morrison discusses how racism, class, gender and patriarchy brought misery and suffering to the lives of African American women. It is true that many meekly accepted the condition but there were also many who opposed

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it strongly. Sula, the protagonist of the novel tries to gain self-awareness and self-improvement by rebelling against the conventions of the community and breaking the norms of the patriarchal society.

II. FAILED MOTHERHOOD

Nel and Sula grow up in very different environments at home. They do not share normal mother-daughter relationships. Nel's mother is too demanding and Sula's mother does not care her. Sula and Nel build a strong bond with each other which provides them consolation and comfort against their own mother's behavior. Sula's father was dead while Nel's father remains out for days in a month. Morrison writes that "Nel and Sula develop a strong bond which allows them to be "two throats and one eye" (147). Helene, Nel's mother herself is a victim of racial discrimination and is a daughter of a prostitute, whom she despises for her immorality. She has been brought up by a pious Christian grandmother, and she tries her best to bring up Nel as an ideal Christian woman conforming to the norms of the society. Helene is herself a self-proclaimed embodiment of morality. She is also conventional and tries to get rid of all the wildness of her nature in order to be a refined lady devoid of any impression of her prostitute mother and impact of her past. She behaves like a pious Christian, visits the Church regularly and internalizes all values of the community. She tries to make her daughter Nel to follow them meticulously and thus she makes her upbringing very demanding and oppressive. As a result of this rigorous upbringing, Nel becomes passive and docile.

Sula's mother Hannah is diametrically opposite to Nel's mother Helene. Hannah very much believes in sexual freedom. She openly challenges the moral conventions of the community as she is addicted to casual sex. She is a sensuous beautiful widow who keeps a steady sequence of lovers. She enjoys frequent sex with men along with the newlywed husbands who have come for their honeymoon in the rented room of the Peace house. She owns autonomy to a certain degree because of this behavior and is therefore reluctant to raise her daughter Sula according to the norms of the society. Hannah and Sula's sexual promiscuity pose a threat to the marital norms of the community in Bottom. They question the traditional values of the society by their lack of emotional engagement in relationship and love for freedom. Eva, Sula's grandmother did not love her children when small, and this behavior of her's is reflected in Hannah who neglects Sula. Sula learns about sexual behavior from her mother and does not know the societal concept of proper behavior and conduct. This can be observed later in her conduct of choosing men indiscriminately. Due to her mother's manners, behavior and indifference Sula feels abandoned and isolated. Nel's mother is very strict, keeps her house very orderly and her aim and dream is to see her daughter properly wed. As a result Nel cannot think of sexuality beyond the institution of marriage. Nel inherits all the conventions of the society from her mother, which influence her adult life. Nel feels isolated due to her mother's strict rules.

III. EFFECT OF RACISM

The effect of racism can be observed in Helene's worry for her daughter Nel's physical appearance. Helene accepts the white's conception of beauty and Caucasian racial characteristics. She tells her daughter that her nose is very big and therefore it looks ugly. She tells her to pull her nose, in order to have a nice nose when she grows up. She poses a serious identity problem by denying her daughter the essence of her blackness and making her accept

the white's ideal of beauty that a narrow nose is beautiful. Hannah, once talking to her friend about her daughter states that she loves her girl Sula however doesn't like her. Sula is much hurt and saddened by her mother's words. In bewilderment, she remained at the window fingering the drape edge, mindful of a sting in her eye. Nel's call skimmed up and into the window, pulling her away from dim musings once more into the brilliant, hot sunshine. At this time Nel's voice comforts her. Hannah's coarse words and statement upset Sula who suffers terribly. They do not share mother-daughter solidarity instead it is Nel who saves Sula from the emotional wreckage brought about by her mother. Nel and Sula experience oppressive environment in their own houses. Nel and Sula's girlhood bondage makes them survive estranged mother-daughter relationship. Nel receives courage from her friendship with Sula and learns to be her own self.

Nel and her mother Helene face racism when they were returning via train to New Orleans for her grandma's memorial service. Helene, having experienced childhood in New Orleans knows the perils of overstepping Jim Crow Laws, which isolated white society from dark. Helene has incidentally ventured over the line that isolates the two races in a Whites just vehicle, and a conductor cautions and insults them. This journey to south by train with her mother Helene, gives Nel another familiarity with her mother's way of life as a dark lady who is a casualty of both racially isolated society and a patriarchal world. This helps Nel in developing a self-identity and this becomes her first experience of self-awareness. This incident awards Nel her own racial and gender identity, however Nel chooses to respond in a manner different from her mother's. Nel tries to dissociate herself from her mother by whispering "I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me" (28).

HEALING POWER OF FEMALE BONDING

Nel realized that Sula accepts her as she is with her broad nose and so there was no need for her to reshape her nose and undergo the pain of clipping her nose. She is now no longer interested in the hot comb every Saturday to make her hair smooth. Nel's sisterhood with Sula teaches her to defy her own mother. Morrison wishes to convey the message that female friendship can even prove to be more powerful than mother-daughter relationship. It empowers a female and helps her develop a potential to realize her identity. They receive moral and emotional support which renders them capable of finding out solutions to the difficulties they face in their own environment. Nel learns to be independent as a result of her bondage with Sula. It teaches Sula to look at herself from her own perspective and not from her mother's.

Morrison suggests that it is the isolation of the little girls which brings them together. Nel's mother tries to prevent the friendship between Nel and Sula on account of Sula's mother's reputation, but in spite of these restrictions Sula and Nel seek each other. The two girls as they grow up together start exploring their sexuality together in a society marked by racial and gender discrimination. Men in Bottom treat females as mere sexual objects and consider it their right to abuse and harass them. Nel and Sula listen to the comments and face the stares of men in a very conventional manner. When they are twelve years old they pass the time at Half Pool, where Ajax harasses them.

FEMALE BONDING HELPS TO FIGHT OPPRESSION AND OBSTACLES

Nel and Sula's bond grows strong and they defend and protect each other. They are ready to face every sort of oppression together. Sula cuts her finger tip in order to save Nel against Irish boys' harassment. Suranyi comments that this act of Sula is "... rebellion against racism and sexism" (Suranyi 21). It shows how Sula is ready to oppose male oppression. This act also pictures the intensity of Sula's love for her friend Nel and that she cannot tolerate any body hurting her friend. She frightens the boys away by the horror of the act. Nel gets the courage to defy her mother's authority and befriend Sula after this incident. Nel reciprocates Sula's friendship equally by helping her in times of distress.

When Sula and Nel are playing by digging holes in the ground, Chicken Little a small boy, shows up and redirects their consideration. They start playing with him by swinging him from a tree. Sula prods him, picks him and swings him around because of which he loses his parity and gets tossed far into the stream. Sula watches him struggle in the river and Sula is answerable for Chicken Little's suffocation and Nel is the only eye-witness to the drowning and death of Chicken Little. But she decides to remain silent and save her friend from being punished for this crime. Chicken Little's accidental death lends Sula an opportunity to own her selfhood. Morrison through this episode reinforces the need for female bonding. Sula experiences two incidents in her life which change her psychology. The first is when she overhears her mother talking to her friend about loving but not liking Sula, and the second is Chicken Little's death. Sula finds relief and consolation only in her friendship with Nel.

Female bonding not only provides an understanding about self and other to Sula but Nel too. Nel has a confused sense of self. The train journey with her mother helps her in developing a strong bond with Sula and resolving her misconceptions about her self and other. Hence the connection among Nel and Sula obscures the limits of self and other and help them develop new identities to face the prejudices in the world.

IV. BETRAYAL

The relationship among Sula and Nel breaks at last due to the pressure of patriarchy. Morrison conveys the message through *Sula* that race, class and marriage act as patriarchal structures threatening female bonding between Sula and Nel and they do not allow their friendship to continue during their adulthood. Race, class and marriage represent passive patriarchy in the novel. Men in *Sula* are represented as victims of racial prejudice, which makes them oppress women unconsciously. Their oppression at the hands of whites makes them oppress women of their own class, thus adversely affecting the whole society of Bottom. Morrison demonstrates the effect of race and class persecution on men in the novel which shatters their manhood.

Ajax is the only male character in the novel represented as possessing dignity. Jude Greene is another man in the novel who is a victim of racism. Through the example of Jude, Morrison describes the pathetic condition of the African American community in the town Bottom, who pines to have a job, is ready to work hard and lead a respectable life, but is denied jobs as a result of racial discrimination. The African American had to face discriminating political and socio-economic policies. Jude is denied job at a construction site by the white employers. Jude's dream of playing the role of a man in society shatters. Jude neglects to find a manly work in Madellion.

Being defeated in assuming a manly role Jude tries to find compensation by taking refuge in another patriarchal institution of marriage. He thinks that becoming a husband and the head of a household of Nel would empower him and will redeem his manhood. Jude and Nel had not aimed at getting married earlier. Jude weds Nel when his expectations of demonstrating his manliness through building the New River Road are run by supremacist hiring policies. Nel too has accepted her role in a patriarchal society like Jude. The society in which Nel lives arouses expectations of marriage in a girl since she is young. Nel feels flattered that Jude has chosen her as his life partner and plays her expected gender role to support and soothe a man who had faced the trauma of not getting a manly job. Nel and Jude marry each other for the wrong reason. Though Nel pays attention to her husband's needs and provides sympathy to him still their marriage could not sustain, because the socio-economic reasons which make them marry are much more complex and prove to be stronger than Nel's good will to soothe Jude. Nel's marriage with Jude destroys her life because Jude betrays her by sleeping with her friend Sula and breaking all promises that he would love her and live with her forever.

Morrison attempts to center consideration towards the verifiable conditions of post subjection prejudice and state of ladies in the start of twentieth century. Nel's marriage with Jude puts an end to her friendship with Sula. Nel thinks that it is Sula's friendship which breaks her marriage, but she does not ponder upon the fact that it is her marriage which is responsible for estranging her from her friend. Morrison wishes to out-speak the lesson that women ought to understand the significance of female bonding and that marriage is consistently not a higher priority than kinship. Morrison through the case of Nel's hitched life cautions ladies that they should think before connecting with themselves in a man centric foundation of marriage which persecutes them. Nel's decision to marry does not make her realize her identity; similarly, Sula's decision to be independent too thwarts her dreams of self-recognition. Both of them cannot find a substitute to their friendship in the outside world.

Sula unlike Nel rejects traditional route of marriage, motherhood and sets out on a journey of self-recognition, by travelling and going out of her town Bottom for her education. She does not consider becoming a wife and mother as necessary for self-recognition. Nel believes in the institution of marriage, whereas Sula considers it to be bondage, therefore, Nel's marriage with Jude increases the distance between the self and other, thus deceiving their friendship. Sula searches for unconditioned freedom. Sula had learned what her mother Hannah and Grandmother Eva has taught her. Sula's and Nel's actions, behaviour, and the path they follow in life is justified by their different upbringings. Sula grows up in a house which is not ruled by men but by women, Eva and Hannah who entertain men according to their own likes and dislikes and enjoy their sexual freedom.

Sula therefore does not feel guilty after sleeping with Nel's husband Jude. She finds it very easy and considers it as normal behavior and does it without any feeling of shame or any sense of guilt. Sula thinks that since Nel likes everything she likes she would be happy to see Sula deriving happiness by sleeping with her husband Jude. When Sula comes to know about Nel's displeasure, results in their estrangement, she understands that self and other are extraordinary. Thus, Sula loses her only friend Nel.

V. LOVE AND SEX

Morrison composes that Sula was hazardously free, and it was just her very own freedom she thought about. A number of rumours about Sula's sexual independence spread in the community which damaged her reputation for

ever. She is considered by the men as “...the dirt that could never be washed away” (112). Sula treats men in the town Bottom as they have been treating women traditionally. Sula becomes a threat to the traditional sexual norms of the society. Sula’s life lacks direction and becomes fortuitous, as she lacks human capacities required to lead a settled life. She has killed all prospects of leading a healthy life in a society becoming an outcast and a pariah. She attempts to associate with men, with whom she engages in sexual relations. She tries to share her thoughts with men but fails to relate to them and finds only misery and sorrow. Sula fails to seek harmony with any other person. The society despises her and is afraid of her and accepts her image as a witch. People consider her to be evil and because of this, wives become more loving to their husbands and parents become more affectionate and protective to their sons and daughters and there is much unity among these people in fact the black community at the town Bottom as improve itself because of their fear for Sula.

Sula finds real pleasure of love and sex only in Ajax who is a handsome young man in her society. Ajax has loved only his mother and his younger brother. For him women are merely sexual objects, but he was interested in Sula. He was attracted towards her because she was the only lady he realized whose life was her own, who could oversee life effectively, and who was not enthusiastic about nailing him. Sula is enthusiastic about Ajax since he converses with her and they have genuine discussions for which Sula has been pining since ages. He considers her to be intelligent and brilliant like his mother. Sula becomes slowly attached to Ajax and starts expecting him to come to her. Ajax wants his freedom and her independence too and does not appreciate the behavior of Sula. He senses Sula’s desire to create a nest and he deserts her. After Ajax leaves Sula she obtains consolation by remembering her childhood days with Nel.

Sula does not realize the pain she has given to Nel by sleeping with her husband because she has never learned to have faith in the institution of marriage. She does not understand why Nel is so possessive about Jude and why she cannot forget and forgive her having sex with Jude in spite of being such a good friend. When Nel goes to meet Sula who is sick, she is angry at Sula who does not understand her mistake. Sula and Nel’s background have given them different definitions of love. Nel links love with sex, while Sula sees no connection between them. Their opposite views and concepts about life and accepted behavior in society break their friendship.

VI. REQUISITE OF FEMALE BONDING

Nel and Sula’s bonding shows that only female bonding can provide relief and reassurance in a racist, class and gender biased society. Sula’s death shows the need for a strong relationship between self and other to fight all patriarchal institution. Nel rejects Sula for quite a long time yet goes to visit Sula when she is wiped out and kicking the bucket and Sula before her passing recollects Nel. The improvement in Nel’s disposition towards Sula uncovers the fact that Nel realizes that she had not been missing her husband Jude for years, but she does miss her bond with her friend Sula. Nel understands the depth of their friendship and the loss of it deeply grieves her. She cries, “we was girls together”, [...] O Lord, Sula, she cried, ‘girl, girl, girl, girl, girl’. It was a fine cry loud and long but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow” (174).

Nel realizes that it was her marriage, which represents a patriarchal institution that was responsible for the loss of girlhood ties with Sula. It breaks the unity between self and other. Morrison warns her female readers to be cautious of patriarchal structures and not allow them to break their friendship as they did with Nel and Sula. She stresses the

need for building strong friendship bonds between women and also maintaining them, as it helps them fight race, class and gender discrimination.

VII. CONCLUSION

Female unity is the significant relationship in the novel which excludes the diminishing of characters and the primary relationship which supports a sound improvement of characters. The manner in which the female characters in the novel are dismissed and that they experience the nonappearance of male characters which reinforces the significance of female bonding. Female kinship helps the two female characters in confronting the existence's obstructions in their immature years. Their kinship empowers them to adapt to social desires. Toni Morrison depicts Sula's and Nel's fellowship to demonstrate that if ladies developed obligations of friendship among themselves, they would have the option to battle against the oppression. It can be pointed out here for the first time, in the black literary history, an attempt has been made by Morrison to focus on the female solidarity necessary for fostering self as central to black women, in highlighting the friendship of Sula and Nel. This radical stand of Morrison as an artist is to reject the patriarchal assumption that women do not and cannot enjoy spiritual bonding.

The study conveys the lesson that strong bonds between women help them to face oppression in their social environment and also help them in self realization. The effective girlhood bonds help them to assemble new identities, solace and bolster each other during troublesome occasions. Nel and Sula's friendship makes their survival easy in their oppressive environments. They face challenges together and also their estranged mother daughter relationships become easier to bear. The mistakes the female characters do in *Sula* is to submit themselves blindly to the demands of the society and Sula and Nel also commit the mistake of failing to keep their true friendship. Overall both the young ladies have a sense of security in one another's company and used to do compliment to one another. They actually do not find this kind of pure, altruistic, protective and secured feelings in their relationship with men. Therefore the study stresses the needs for a strong relationship between females that is self and other in order to battle male centric establishments.

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