

## IDENTITY DISCRIMINATION & RADICALISM IN TONI MORRISON'S SULA

### Article Particulars

Received: 29.8.2017

Accepted: 5.9.2017

Published: 30.9.2017

**Mrs.S.NASREEN BANU**

*Assistant Professor, Department of English,  
HKRH College, Uthamapalayam,  
Tamil Nadu, India*

---

### Introduction

The term 'postcolonial' is often reserved for Anglophone writers who are often termed as Commonwealth nations. The term is appropriate and important for writers who are often grouped as African-American writers, as if the African-American experience were monolith. Studies of American Colonization address the complex issues of human suffering and denigration resulting from slavery and systemic removal of Native American. In addressing some of the complexities of what American means to the descendants of the African Diaspora, Toni Morrison emerges as a promising voice to critically examine the darkest legacy of the African Diaspora. European Colonists have labeled people of other origins as 'others'. Othering means "beings on the margin" which is a consequence of the binaristic structure of various kinds of dominant discourses, such as patriarchy, imperialism, and ethnocentrism, which imply that certain forms of experiences are peripheral (Ashcroft et al 135). Binary opposition imply man/woman, white/black, European/Non-European. Binary opposition give superiority to terms which embrace western values and patriarchy and thus it is easy to see why character like Sula is identified as An 'evil pariah'. Sula does not conform to the norms of what a woman should be in the society. She is regarded as a radical woman. The reason behind her radicalism is the identity discrimination. Thus the author of this paper would like to deal with the particular aspect of identity discrimination that which leads to the radicalism with reference to Toni Morrison's Sula in this paper.

## **African American Literature**

Each period within the history of African American Literature, contains its own agenda. In each period, however, most African American authors have sought to provide atleast a glimpse into the diverse experience of African Americans. A cursory glance at the breadth of African American literature reveals two facts. First, African American experiences have widely varied from the point that Africans were forcibly brought to America; Second, these experiences are bound by the eternal desires of African Americans to continue surviving and thriving in America.

Appropriately the first two centuries of the African Diaspora's sojourn in the U.S were marked by the dominance of the SLAVE NARRATIVE and African American literature. This does not mean, however, that these two creative forms represented the totality of African American Literature now possesses a core cannon, it is constantly in flux and subject to change in both political climate and taste.

## **Post Colonialism**

The term 'post-colonial'... to cover all the culture affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day. This is because there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression. Post-colonialism touches upon many issues: language (oral vs. written), land(can it be owned?), men's and women's roles(and feminist liberation), nationalism(whether the sense of a cultural grouping of people is replaced by the sense of a country), and hybridism(a forced mixing of cultures, a strange process indigenous to adaptation), to mention but a few. Obviously, problems of crossed identity and imposed inferiority and even a raging hatred for the colonizer surface in the consciousness of the colonized people. Here is where the term "post-colonialism" comes into play. The word is a tool - methodology, when examined, most often through literature reveals what happens when two cultures clash, and based upon one of the culture's assumptions of his superiority. Colonialism undeniably calls up a degree of suppression. Though South Africa was one of the first African countries to gain independence, it remained under the rule of its settler population, in a policy known as Apartheid, until 1994.

## **About The Novelist**

By the early seventies a group of striking novels by women positively explored the female experience in a world of male domination, and declared an independence, sexual freedom and frankness. They have struggled had to make themselves heard, and have raised their voices against vital issues that affect the Black Woman. They write not merely for the sake of writing but for themselves, for maintaining emotional and intellectual clarity, for sustaining self-development and instruction. Several

important black women writers played so big a role in the development of the American novel in the seventies eighties. The most important is surely, Toni Morrison.

Toni Morrison is one of those rare authors whose works achieve critical literary success. She is both Nobel Prize winners and bestselling author. The secret of Morrison's success lies in her ability to transcend perceived oppositions. Her prose is always lyrical, filled with hypnotic sentences. Morrison tells stories that many do not want to hear and her means of telling often leaves readers spellbound. Morrison's literary works give access to and an understanding of African American culture. Using conventional narratives, structures, poetic language, myth and folklore, Morrison addresses such issues as black victimization, the emotional and social effects of racial and sexual oppression and the difficulties African American face in trying to achieve a sense of identity in a society dominated by white cultural values.

### **Identity Discrimination and Radicalism**

Morrison's second novel **Sula** was produced in the midst of the reinvigorated feminist movement and debate. The novel explores equally an extra ordinary consciousness and the gap between generations. Morrison deals with a theme of friendship between two black girls. One Nel Wright, follows the pattern of life society has laid out for her, and the other Sula Peace, tries to create her own pattern, to achieve herself. **Sula** covers African American experience in the mid-century where individuals lived in less fear but still felt the effects of colonialism.

The major predicament that Morrison considers in this novel is the effect of racism and sexism upon the identity formation of the black female. In **Sula** Morrison captures most profoundly the way concepts of good and evil related to societal definitions of woman. Bottom characterizes all its women as a class and not in terms of dependent beautiful ornaments. Because of this black community's vulnerability, the distinguishing characteristic of the class of women is that she insures the continuity of the community by bearing children and by supporting the beleaguered men either sexually, emotionally or financially.

**Sula** is fundamentally a women's novel in the sense that it concerns itself with the feeling and affairs of woman and the roles they assume, whether by choice or force. It chronicles the fortunes of women in two matriarchal households within the black community whose lives represent the range of choices possible for black women in white America. Even though a good deal of the action of the novel derives from the consequences of male and female relationships, it is the self-perception of woman and her subsequent reactions to self-concept that central to it.

Sula is defiant of the Mid-west who has been neither wife more mother. She has an intense desire to give birth to herself as a person. Her quest for her identity is precipitated by different personal needs and reflects different attitudes towards the

human condition. Hers is a formidable struggle, for the lives in societies which censure individual expression especially for women.

Sula, the protagonist of the novel, suffers not only at the hands of whites but also at the hands of black. That is why she rejects the traditional role ascribed to women in the society. Motherhood is a source of empowerment and liberation for women. But, Sula rejects this view. When a woman chooses not to be a mother, she breaks away from her ancestry and does not pass her heritage on. Sula is an example of woman who chooses self-fulfillment over motherhood. Eva tries to make Sula understand the importance of being a married mother:

When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. I will settle you. (Sula.92)

Sula's reply is:

I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself. (Sula.92)

Sula's ideas about self-fulfillment are that women first of all need to have a meaningful life and gainful employment before even being to consider becoming mother. Here Morrison is interested in the struggle for woman's right rather than in the rights of the African people as a collective.

Sula experiences two things that create her radical self. First she overhears her mother's arguments with her friends, "I love sula. I just don't like her" (Morrison 57). Despite any real or perceived limitations imposed by her family, her community or the era in which she is depicted. Sula does not put any limits upon herself still, her "quite essential blackness" isolates her from a community that enacts and is utterly antithetical esthetic. Sula becomes instructive precisely because she is deemed destructive by the other characters in the novel. A young woman coming of age in a rural Ohio community during the period between world wars, Sula is marked, both literally and figuratively, by her singularity of thought and action.

She leaves her home for ten years, during which she travels across the country and attends college and more adventures. She returns with plague of robins back to home town. She refuses to maintain the family house in the manner of her mother and her grandmother before her. Her sexual exploits do not lead her to a state of monogamy, shared domesticity or even steady companionship with one memorable exception; Sula's interactions with men are consciously finite. Morrison sums it up as:

...She (Sula) lived out her days exploring her own thoughts and emotions, giving them full reign, feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her. As willing to feel pain as to give pain, hers was an experimental life... (Sula 118)

Sexuality becomes a stem of memory, but not out of meeting. Sexuality is for Sula, a place where she recovers the self that her mother took away, the self on which she depends. Sexuality for Sula is not the attempt with an "other", but with herself. It is attempt to find the centre that she has lost:

There in the centre of that silence was not eternity but the death of time and loneliness so profound the word itself had no meaning. For loneliness assumed the absence of other people, and the solitude she found in that desperate terrain had never admitted the possibility of other people. She wept then... (in) the post colonial privateness in which she met herself, and joined herself in matchless harmony. (Sula 123)

Sula develops friendship with Nel Wright and both find in each other what each lacks in themselves. For Nel and Sula the problem of one's loss of identity is a direct result of the Bottom's limiting definition of women as subservient, self-sacrificing beings. Nel assumes the traditional role the community prescribes, and retains her social identity, though her personal identity is non-existent. Sula, by contrast is a free-spirited woman whose determination to define herself places her at odds with the culturally rich black community. In the world of discrimination both the women find their life with contradictions and tensions. As M.L.Montgomery observes, Nel and Sula "experience a profound sense of alienation in a patriarchal world which evolves no terms for their existence". (132)

Sula openly challenges the limitations imposed upon her individuality and much to the consternation of the community, vengefully disregards time-honored traditions and conventions. She categorically rejects 'others' use to measure her life. The profundity of Sula's defiance is a reflection of the sharp contrast between who she is and what the Bottom decrees for its women. The result of all these incidents is that Sula comes to be regarded as the local incarnation of evil pariah, whose effects creates change and catastrophe within the natural and social worlds.

Sula's rebelliousness manifests in several ways. Unlike other women, she refuses to marry, settle down and raise a family. She, moreover, attends their functions underwearless. She feels no objects to please anyone. Her determination to achieve self-fulfillment allows her "to live in the world", (Sula 43) but not to be caught up in the spider web-like life of the Bottom where she would be called upon to confirm, to "dangle in dry places suspended by (her) own spittle more terrified of all the free fall than the snake's breath below". (Sula 103-104)

With nothing to depend on, not even herself, Sula patterns her life on being not separated and unconventional, on the free fall that requires "invention" and "a fall surrender to the downward flight" (Morrison 120). Sula is at once, all self and no self: "an artist with no medium, energy without form" (Morrison 121). Refusing participation in community, Sula find no "other" against whom she can define herself. Her energy and curiosity seeks limits throughout the novel finding the only real limit in death. Though existing independent and unpredictable, her character is fundamentally, finally static. Sula's uncontainability is so well contained that no one and nothing can get to her. A non-traditional or to use Morrison's word, "improvisational", character cannot sustain a traditional role, Sula become the "New world women" of Morrison's vision.

## Conclusion

Sula's journey to world self determination places her at odds with pursuits that would limit her achievements. Sula seems to have forced her to create her own identity that takes her outside the bottom's narrow confines, and then back to her beginnings. And her rule-defying behavior reveals, she maintains in self nature as an end and of itself, whereas for Eva, Nel and other women in town, mothering, care-taking and bearing a household are non-negotiable woman's work.

As a young girl she so startles the community with her extreme emotional impulses that her growth into a "strange, strong and independent woman" is all but predictable. She rejects "behavioral standards of all kinds" and attempts to "rely solely on herself". It is to herself, and only to herself that Sula wishes to be good she is firmly of the view that ... Being good to somebody is just like being mean to somebody. Risky you don't get anything for it. (Sula 35)

Thus Sula lives out her own fantasies, create her own realities, and sets her own personal objectives. In short, she is motivated by the firm sense of "Me-ness". Through **Sula** Morrison shows women's need to create their own notion of selfhood.

## References

### Primary Source

1. Morrison, Toni. *Sula*. New York: Knop, 1973

### Secondary Sources

1. Ashcroft, Bill and Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. *Key concepts in Post Colonial Studies*, London: Routledge, 1998.
2. Banyiwā, Naana-Horne. "The Sacry Face of the Self: An analysis of the character of Sula in Toni Morrison's *Sula*". SAGE, 30.
3. M Dowell, Dedorah, "The self and the other": Reading Toni Morrison's "*Sula* and the Balck Remale Text". *Modern cirtial views –Toni Mrrison*. Ed.Harold Bloom, New York: Chelsea, 1990. 149-63
4. Montgomery, Mexine Lavon. "A pilgrimage to the origins: The Apocalypse as structure and theme in Toni Morrison's *Sula*". *Black American Literature Forum* 23, 1(Spring 1989):132
5. Ray Arunima. "The Quest of Home' and Wholeness in *Sula* and *Meridian* Afro-American identity to Toni Morrison and Alice Walker". *Indian Journal of American studies*.23,2 (Summer 1993):61.