

SULA AS A SYMBOL OF BLACK AMERICANS AS REFLECTED IN TONI MORRISON’S SULA



Women’s Studies
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Abstract

This paper examines racism and sexism as well as the effects of race, class on male-female relationships. Toni Morrison has presented women’s responses to patriarchal institutions and various attempts to subjugate black men and women through traditional limitations and caste and prejudice. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how black women are treated unequally and how they are also subjected to male dominance in American societies. The paper promotes the healing power of female bonding, which enables women to overcome prejudice and survive, to experience female empowerment and self-identification, and to extend female friendship into female solidarity that contributes to the male-female relationship. For the reasons mentioned above, this paper aims to examine the symbolic character of Sula with reference to Morrison’s Sula.

Introduction

Women are frequently regarded as second-class citizens. They are thought to be unequal to males. Their inferiority complex is also considered in the United States. They are being discriminated and mistreated for ages. They are looked down upon and tended to be in the minority. They struggle to improve their circumstances because they are deprived of rights and suffragettes. It begins in 1848 at the first Women’s Rights Convention. It then continues until the 1920s, with suffrage, and the 1960s, with emancipation. For a long time, slavery was a source of great hardship for Afro-Americans. During the cruel American slavery system, black people had virtually little freedom. Slaves were eventually freed, but emancipation did not provide blacks with the same privileges as the white people. They were nonetheless subjected to oppression, discrimination, and uneven opportunities in comparison to the white. In general, black Americans suffered greatly, but black American women endured considerably more hardships than their male counterparts. (Que, 2010, p.1).

In this regard, Harley and Terborg-Penn stated that “the problem of black women was predominantly perceived by black American men as a struggle against racism rather than a combat against sexism” (1978, p.28). This message implies that black American women’s struggle was not viewed as a protest against men. Instead, their struggle was regarded as a struggle for freedom and equality with the white people the entire race. Women of colour in the United States endured much more prejudice than males of colour. They were defined as being in double jeopardy since they were subjugated as both blacks and women (Chafe, 1976, p.338). This comment demonstrates that black American women were treated unequally not only because of their race but also because of their gender. The fact that whites and black American men do not treat black American women equally provides the impetus for focusing the conversation on the spirit of black feminists against racism and sexism, as reflected in the field of English literature.

The novel *Sula* by Toni Morrison begins with the demolition of the Bottom, the black community's land, to make room for suburban development. The community tales about the Bottom, on the other hand, have a tone of loss and remembrance about how it was once a vibrant neighbourhood with beautiful trees, a pool hall, a beauty parlour, a church, a restaurant, and many black men and women. The residents were united by music and familiarity, and laughter could be heard as far as the surrounding valley. While this black community becomes homeless, it makes light of the situation by repeating the white man's joke that brought the community together in the first place (Schreiber, 2010, p.19).

The name 'The Bottom' comes from a nasty joke that was played on a slave. In exchange for some gruelling labour, a white farmer once promised his slave freedom and a lush bottomland. The farmer did release the slave after the labour was completed, but instead of lush bottomland, he handed him a steep track of land worn away by erosion. The farmer informed the slave that the hilly area was bottomland, as it was "heaven's bottom" (5). Unfortunately, the slave did not know any better and accepted the land. The unlucky slave soon discovered the truth. The white residents, however, have discovered the beauty of the Bottom and have purchased the land, forcing the blacks to leave. The Bottom, with all of its rich history and comfortable familiarity, is being demolished to make way for a luxurious golf course. (Pp.19-20).

Sula is a feminist novel that advocates for human equality without discrimination based on gender or ethnicity. This closes the social customs by addressing the perplexing enigma of human emotions and relationships. Morrison has depicted these two female characters in such a way that the opposing categories of black/white are applied to the characters and their activities as a set of opposites. It asserts that the novel's two neglected African-American female characters, Nel and Sula, are notable and influential because they are depicted in a critical role that undermines the largely masculine enterprise (Thapa, 2021, p.99).

Morrison's work examines the subject of race relations in the United States. *Sula* is ostracized on two levels: she attends college, sleeps with a white man, never marries, and refuses to have children. Morrison has established a black community that is deeply rooted in its past values and beliefs, so any attempt to establish a new ethic will send the entire community into a frenzy of disbelief and terror. *Sula* investigates the constructs of black womanhood and manhood in the book, particularly through Sula's character, who refuses the traditional black female position. Sula is determined to break free of the typical role of domesticity, and she must develop an identity that is more than just a wife and mother. She is looking for an internally defined identity rather than one shaped by the family paradigm. She leaves the village and returns with new experiences; she is unable to follow the old rules anymore. Following her return, her actions have elicited a wide range of reactions and accusations. She sleeps with white men as well as her best friend's husband and her neighbours' husbands. Morrison has the chance to look at how both characters react to the African-American community's ideals and expectations. Women's lives are really difficult. They are based on the history and ideals that have been passed down through the generations. It emphasizes human equality with regard to ethnicity or gender. Sula is tortured and

maltreated by the white people when she struggles to establish her identity in the society and community (Thapa, 2021, p.100).

Racism against Black Males

Former slaves had to overcome racism as well as other challenges. Southern whites disputed that black people were citizens. They had historically regarded black people as second-class citizens (Thernstrom, 1997, p.27). Because black Americans were not considered equal citizens to whites, they were provided with inferior public facilities. The racial segregation system, known as Jim Crow's Laws, was implemented in the late nineteenth-century. In the late nineteenth and early twenty centuries, white Americans in the South adopted Jim Crow legislation.

The name Jim Crow was coined to characterize the laws, norms, and customs of the South that were designed to support white supremacy and keep black people in their place. Jim Crow was not just about keeping races apart; segregation was, too, but it was also a part of a larger system of power dynamics aimed to maintain white dominance.

Jim Crow was a system with economic, social, and political components working together to oppress black Americans, historian Leon Litwack refers to it as the engine of dominance. As part of the system, there is violence and the fear of violence. But Jim Crow was more than just violence; it was an entire system designed to keep black people from advancing. Jim Crow was defined by the withholding of resources to African-Americans. For example, blacks had either inadequate or no access to education, and black women seeking work in industries, shops, department stores, and a variety of newly sex-stereotyped positions, such as secretaries or sales clerks, swiftly ran into the Jim Crow barrier. The majority of these positions were only available to white women (Boles, 2002).

According to bell hooks (1981) black women, in particular, have been discriminated against because of their sex and race. As a result, feminism is a significant movement since it is a fight to end sexist oppression. Feminism is not a declaration of gender warfare. It is difficult to transform an elitist and dominance-based system. She also states, "Feminism is the answer to the gender divide: it may change relationships such that sentiments of alienation, competitiveness, and dehumanization that define human contact are replaced by feelings of closeness, mutuality, and solidarity" (Pp.20-35). Women who band together are better able to articulate their needs and demand equality. Unfortunately, sexual violence has been a valuable weapon of oppression in American history.

The cause for this double standard, according to bell hooks, is a desire to limit black women's sexual behaviour. He claims that black males utilized the same approach as white men to limit white women's sexual behaviour, inventing the myth of the black rapist to exert control over white women's sexuality (hooks, 1981, p.67). Black men have been able to restrict and control black women's sexual freedom by employing the same strategy – establishing the myth of the white exploiter.

Hooks also says that black males have been able to “deflect attention away from black male sexual exploitation of women” as a result of “the emphasis on the white man as sexual exploiter” (68). For many black people, racism has been viewed as such a significant issue that they have neglected to address and comprehend the consequences of sexual violence against black Americans.

Racism against Black Females

Racism is a major concern in Morrison’s *Sula*. The incident with Nel’s mother on the train at the opening of the novel; the white men’s treatment of Chicken’s body after the novel; and the dilemma of blacks gaining work building the new tunnel at the end of the novel. It appears to be forming a frame. There are two incidences at the beginning and one at the conclusion, but racism is not mentioned in the story until the Chicken Little scene outside of the Bottom. This appears to be a narrative tactic employed by Morrison to demonstrate how racism pervades society and has a significant impact on practically every element of life, including poverty. These people, for the most part, continue to live their lives despite it, keeping its intrusion to a minimum, because their primary function was to be housewives, black American women were not allowed to attend college. As a result, Morrison attempts to break the chain that prevents black women from obtaining an education in *Sula*. The female protagonist Sula spent ten years at college. She was the only woman from the bottom who had received an education (Morrison, 1973, p.99).

Morrison has questioned what a woman should be in society. *Sula* was significant because it attacked patriarchy by depicting a female-to-female interaction and challenging traditional gender standards. The novelist depicts African American women’s urge to define themselves and oppose men’s domination and control (Morrison, 1973, p.54). In a sexist society, there are double standards. Because of her promiscuity and the fact that she is reported to have sex with white men, the novel is dubbed a bitch. Even though it is acceptable for a black man to have sex with a white woman, black men hate Sula having sex with white men. Men are afraid of her because she refuses to comply with societal norms. Prejudice and double standards are manifestations of this fear: Every one of them pictured the scene, each according to his preferences – Sula beneath some white man – and it made them gag. There was nothing lower, nothing filthier she could do. Their bile was unaffected by the fact that their skin colour was confirmation that it had happened in their own families. The willingness of black men to sleep in white women’s beds was not considered as a factor that might lead to tolerance (Pp.112-113).

According to Morrison, Sula is a masculine character. She is self-assured, fearless, and treats men the same way she respects women (p.53). As a result, Sula does not fit society’s ideal of what a black American woman should be. Sula is asking black women to break free from the patriarchal system’s oppressive oppression by overcoming established gender conventions. Morrison draws attention to the core of black women’s oppression and, at the same time, offers support to a solution by creating characters who forthrightly relate their experiences of sexism and

by producing characters that resist society's-imposed standards. She has talked about black males and black women's relationships. Her concentration is on black injustice, not white persecution.

According to the black woman, her husband oppresses her and treats her unfairly. Morrison shows that some males had a similar concept of how to approach women through various male characters. This simply means that men frequently treat women unequally. The female character in fiction, on the other hand, was presented as a powerful woman who refused to be subordinate to her husband or masculine rule and strove for equality. The female characters are fiercely autonomous, defying the usual roles of an obedient wife, mother, and daughter. Sula and Eva are the most renowned members of this group. By the end of the story, Nel, who was raised by her mother to accept the submissive roles of wife, mother, and daughter without any protest, recognizes the power of femininity, though it is uncertain what she will do with her power and freedom.

Morrison says that survival is also crucial for African American women. Eva and Hannah are aware that being black and female limits their chances, so they prepare for the winter by canning food during the summer. On the other hand, she does not have access to a creative outlet. Without a suitable outlet, she becomes dangerous, because her sins are unintended, she has no idea she is harmful. She relies on men to fill the voids in her life. Sula is despised by the population of Bottom, yet she is tolerated. She is an outcast in the village of Bottom. She stands out from the crowd and is unconcerned about what others think of her. Her freedom comes at any cost: she is cut off from the rest of the community. Sula, on the other hand, is unconcerned; she simply wants to live her life her own so that she can establish her identity in American society.

Sula was significant because it attacked patriarchy by depicting a female-to-female interaction and challenging traditional gender standards. Morrison depicts black American women's urge to "establish their own idea of selfhood" and fight men's domination and control through Sula (Morrison, 1973, p.54). Sula is labelled a bitch because of her promiscuity and also because she is reported to have sex with white men, demonstrating that double standards persist in a sexist culture. Even though it is acceptable for a black man to have sex with a white woman, black men hate Sula having sex with white men (p.53).

Morrison encourages women to defy patriarchy by questioning gender bias and men's dominance. *Sula* is a mirror of female identity and the novel's protagonist is a symbol of black Americans. It also presents the role of black women in black culture. The main focus of *Sula* is on the reality that black males treat black women unequally. Only black men were responsible for the mistreatment of black women. This suggests that the bond between black men and women was far more significant than the bond between blacks and whites. Since the novel focuses on the experiences of black women in their relationships with black men, the battle of black women to break free from patriarchal dominance has grown in importance. As a result, the work can be classified as a black feminist novel because its primary goal is to depict black women's struggles in American society.

Conclusion

Black women have been discriminated and maltreated for ages. They were singled out for discrimination not only because they were black and members of a minority group, but also because they were the second sex in the society and community. Morrison's novel *Sula* has depicted repressive settings specifically encountered by black women, in addition to presenting the cruel behaviour of whites toward blacks. Black people faced racial discrimination primarily from white people. They are considered uncivilized, illiterate, and of lower-class people in the society than white people, resulting in their social inferiority. That is why white people develop laws to keep whites and blacks apart in order to maintain their supremacy, power, and dominance over black men and women. Separation applies to every element of black life, including public facilities. Racist is also shown from the unjust punishment given to the blacks who have broken the rule of segregation.

Sexual violence in the black community is primarily due to the patriarchal law and order. Black people think that the male is the family's head that he looks after and dominates the woman. They also believed that black woman has to take the conventional role of black woman, to be a housewife and to settle down with a man. Because both black men and women accept their place, Patriarchal values continue to develop among black people. It becomes second nature to black women. Their families also encourage patriarchal values despite all the failures. This condition is fully depicted in Morrison's *Sula* through the character of female protagonist Sula.

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