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SOLIDARITY AS AN ACT OF RESISTANCE: READING TONI MORRISON'S "SULA"

HIMAXEE BORDOLOI

Ph.D Scholar, IIT Guwahati



ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to examine how Toni Morrison has employed female black solidarity as an act of resistance against the patriarchal set up. The warmth, security and sisterhood which Nel-Sula shares through their relationship not only heal the oppression meted out to the doubly marginalized black women, but also poses a threat to the heterosexual patriarchal structure. Through the two complementary characters Nel-Sula, this paper attempts to delineate how female solidarity itself can be a tool for resisting the dominant patriarchal ideologies.

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“...they immediately felt the ease and comfort of old friends. Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be...” (*Sula*)

Toni Morrison's novels render feminist readings because of the ways in which they challenge the social forces of gender, race, and class. Her novels voice the double “simultaneity of oppression” of being a black and a woman in the racist patriarchal society and in this regard *Sula* is no exception. *Sula* examines the suffering and oppression of the black women through racism and sexism in the African American society. However, her novel also depicts the sense of black sisterhood which creates a sense of solidarity against common suffering. *Sula* is the story of the friendship of two African American women Sula Peace and Nel Wright who try different means to exist in the alien white patriarchal society. While one tries to belong or fit into the conventional patriarchal set up, the other chooses unbelongingness as a marker of celebration. The Nel-Sula relationship relies on their ‘shared secrets’, emotional bonds and trust. As Audre Lorde states black women are “always bonded together in support of each other, however uneasily and in the face of whatever other allegiances which militated against that bonding” (22). Being neither white, nor male Sula and Nel find strength in the sisterhood they form within an antagonistic society. However both the characters complement each other and together they form a complete whole. The girls grow into womanhood clinging to each other and providing what the other lacks in herself. Their relationship undermines the patriarchal heterosexual societal norms and the notion that a women need to be solely dependent on a man. The novel, besides exploring the bonding of sisterhood, poignantly reflects the communitarian pathos and their suffering in a hostile environment. Toni Morrison carefully emphasizes on the different matrilineal lineage of both Nel and Sula. The novel deals with the three generations of these families. It reflects the change and stability of women's bonds in various stages of life. The Segregated Bottom is a world of Mothers, Grandmothers and Great-grandmothers. So far is Nel

Wright is concerned her background is typical of most woman. She is Everywoman. Morrison portrays the picture of a stereotypical conservative female lineage in her. Nel Wright the daughter of Helen Wright is brought up in a very conventional manner to distance Nel from the blood line of Helene's promiscuous mother Rochelle. Helen tries to conform herself to the white middle class 'norms' and in doing so she rather becomes obsessed with propriety. She acts as a conservative and manipulative housewife, and becomes a member of the most conservative church. However the order and boundaries of Helen's middle class conservative, religious respectability do not protect her from racial prejudices. The train journey where she was humiliated by the white conductor, is indicative of the fact that in spite of her effort to smile in order to please him only makes the white conductor's sense of superiority more secure. In a society like Medallion the Black's endeavour to succumb to the white ways of life even by conforming to it results in oppression. Therefore after this very train journey Nel Wright reflects on the racial oppression they encounter and after meeting her prostitute grandmother Rochelle she embarks on her new found independence where she desires to be only herself. Nel's assertion of her independence is further strengthened with her friendship with Sula Peace. However Morrison carefully delineates Sula's family tree to better understand the remarkable independent protagonist Sula Mae Peace. Before we meet Sula Peace we meet her grandmother Eva-the dominant matriarch figure. Toni Morrison through the character of Eva challenges the stereotypical notions of womanhood and motherhood. Eva who after five years of her marriage to BoyBoy finds herself abandoned with three children has no other choice than to rise to the occasion. Unlike Hannah who surrenders herself to the conventional norms of the society Eva evolves as a matriarch figure who rules her little kingdom from her wagon chair. After she is left destitute by her husband the mysterious sacrifice of her one leg provided her financial assistance and helped her children to grow into adulthood. Eva is strongly, and rationally protected till the end of her lifetime. Her house which she builds on her own is a haven for her women who do not have to submit their lives to the dictates of husbands or lovers. Both she and her daughter Hannah enjoy the company of 'maleness'. Whereas Eva ends on flirtations Hannah enjoys the physical company of man for her own satisfaction. Eva cannot afford to uphold the feminine aspects the society expects of her. She is stripped off the softer feminine and nurturing attitudes by the hostile society around her. She no longer resembles the traditional role of womanhood. Her act of killing her only son Plum further questions the traditional notions of motherhood. She would rather end Plum's degradation herself rather than allow him to kill himself with drugs. Eva's act of killing her own son also raises questions whether love is subject to morality. As such through Eva Toni Morrison portrays an altogether different version of Motherhood. However although Morrison portrays Eva as a strong respectable matriarch she is also not fully free from the conventions of the society. During the later part of the novel when Sula returns to Bottom after a period of ten years she criticizes Sula for not marrying till then. It is in this regard however, that Eva can be distinguished from her rather rebellious grand-daughter Sula Peace.

The contrast between Nel and Sula's upbringing is startling indeed. However it is this very contrast which binds them together. Coming from an oppressively neat household Nel likes the casual disorder of Sula's household. Whereas Sula enjoys sitting on the 'red velvet sofa' in the quiet of an afternoon. In fact Nel/Sula together create a complete individual. Whereas Sula represents the impulsive emotional one; Nel represents the practical one. In Sula's eyes Nel is the closest thing that she has to another and a self. Sula feels betrayed when Nel marries Jude Greene. She viewed it as a sign of betrayal because in doing so Nel is conforming to the traditional roles of the society. Therefore soon after Nel's marriage Sula leaves Bottom for a period of ten years. However when Sula returns to the Bottom she is accompanied by a plague of robins. Everything she does seems to shock the entire community. Sula turned out to be the rebel against all society, all conventions and nearly all moralities. In her desperate quest for freedom Sula is labelled as a witch and a doom-eager 'demon' in the eyes of the black community. Whereas the society insists on the discreet, consistent and confined roles Sula defies all the social conventions. Sula does not care whether she fits into the definition of a black woman, she does not care whether the men she sleeps with are married or not. She rather chooses to be a 'misfit', not to belong. So far as the white consciousness is concerned the question of a black woman's

sexuality is very much problematized. Love making with a black female could be so alien to the white imagination that literally nothing could describe it. However, Sula through her act of love making to the white men challenges the white patriarchal society and poses a threat to it. Sula's courage, her determination to be free to 'make herself' necessarily self-victimizes her. Blackness has often been associated with serpentine and satanic qualities. Sula too faced the racist attitude of being a witch having misadventures. The accidental fall of TeaPot, the death of Mr Finley while choking on a chicken and all the ills and misfortunes are finally attributed to her. Ironically this has a positive effect on the residents of the Bottom as they gained a solidarity against the threat (i.e Sula) in their midst. However the most striking act of Sula is her engagement with a casual sexual intercourse with her best friend's husband Jude Greene. This episode terminates their friendship (although momentarily). When Jude abandons Nel and her three children she blames it on Sula. However Nel's sense of 'self' is lost when she decides to belong, that very moment she became a wife and a mother. Our initial response to Sula's act of betrayal would lead us to take side of the societal norms of the people of Bottom where Nel is represented as a 'good' woman whereas Sula is perceived as the 'evil' one. From the point of view of the society Nel performs all the obligatory roles a woman needs to perform. She fits or rather belongs clearly into the hierarchical structure of the society which consist moral order from top to bottom. Recollecting the dreadful moment of discovery "Nel wonders: How could Sula have done that? How Could Jude leave? (Bloom 19) . Betrayed by the two most important person of her life Nel takes the job of a chambermaid in the hotel Medallion in order to support her family. However, it was Sula who was surprised at Nel's reaction and discovers that Nel is one of "them". Sula's refusal to belong or reform has cost her the only relationship she has ever craved. However inspite of that Sula defies to conform to the obligations of the society. When Nel visits her friend on her death bed she tries to understand her insistence on her self-independence and freedom:

"You can't have it all Sula

"I can do it all, why can't i have it all?"

"You can't do it all. You a woman and a colored woman at that. You can't act like a man. You Can't be walking around all independent-like, doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don't" (Sula 142)

Nel reminds Sula that her independence has to pay a price for it. It resulted in her isolation from the society. However Sula asserts her that her isolation is her own making whereas Nel's loneliness is "somebody else's... a secondhandly lonely". For Nel the act of betrayal by her best friend still haunts her. Therefore even when she visits a dying Sula she asks her "why you didn't love me enough to leave him alone. To let him love me. You had to take him away". Sula replies

"If we were such good friends, how come you couldn't get over it"? (140).

With Sula's question Morrison addresses the doubt of supremacy of Nel's marriage over their friendship. Sula's expectation addresses that the intimate bonds between woman may even supersede the institution of marriage. And Morrison has given importance to the woman to woman bond with Nel's realization after the death of Sula. The 'self' of Nel which was lost by her submission to the conventional roles of a black wife and mother is reclaimed sometime after the death of Sula. Recollecting her memories with her best friend Sula she redeems herself by acknowledging that she wasn't always the 'good' one. What made her good was her togetherness with Sula. She realizes that all these years she thought she was missing Jude by in reality it was Sula whom she was missing.

"At that time, all that time i thought i was missing Jude,... We was girls together...O Lord,Sula... girl,girl, girlgirlgirl" (174).

This realization of Nel culminates the Woman to Woman bond, asserting their individuality even by transcending death.

Thus Toni Morrison's *Sula* addresses the questions of the the black women's identity, her sexuality and most importantly challenges the conventional attributes of 'good' and 'evil' which society bestows on women basing on their assigned roles. It examines how one a woman is expected to belong to the societal

norms through the character of Nel, but at the same time it also delineates how certain 'misfits' like Sula challenges the established norms.

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