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RACE, CLASS AND GENDER IN TONI MORRISON'S *SULA*

MAHAMMAD AZAM

Research Scholar, Department of English  
Kakatiya University, Warangal, Telangana



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ABSTRACT

Race, class and gender are related to groups of people who differ and are similar in biological qualities which society considers socially meaningful, implying that people treat one another differently based on their biological differences and similarities. The concept of race, class, and gender have been discussed in Morrison's text by critics, but this paper highlights Sula and Nel's progression through life as they become aware of their limitations as black women and realise that whiteness has the greatest influence on their progress toward selfhood. Differences in race and social status allow for tiny glimpses of independence, but genuine freedom is an illusion. From Sula's viewpoint, the capacity to transcend society's expectations of her, which vary depending on class and ethnicity, and establish a distinct self would imply real freedom. Morrison emphasises the risks that exist within this conundrum of male dominance, class position, and white privilege in this book. This risk stems from the disconnect between society's perception of female freedom and what it means to these women. The dominant race and class, white middle-class society, is shown to be in charge of the illusions of freedom. Those around them will see the female characters' actions as harmless boundary testing and meaningless play as long as they stay within the white norm's approved boundaries, but to these female characters, their actions reflect wilful and serious struggles for autonomy and freedom. This article investigates how Toni Morrison utilises Sula, the primary female character in her novel to highlight the complex connection between race, class, and gender in the fight to break free from society's expectations.

**Keywords:** Gender, Race, Class, Freedom, Society

Toni Morrison crafts a story of women's liberties and limitations through the lives of two black women, Nel Wright and Sula Peace, in her book *Sula*. Her book not only recounts the tale of these women's lives, but it also gives readers a peek into the effect of white culture, class, and gender discrimination in Medallion (also known as the Bottom), a southern black town in the 1940s. Morrison juxtaposes Nel and Sula's social situations to expand on the intricacy and distinctiveness of their struggles to become independent, and she utilises the girls' "coming of age" to highlight the effect of whiteness on black women. Morrison uses Sula to remark on the impact of gender and racial stereotypes, demonstrating how these expectations, along with class, significantly

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affect and hamper Sula and Nel's aspirations of independence and distinct identities that accept difference above conformity.

### Defining Race, Class and Gender

The term race and class refer to groups of people who have differences and similarities in biological traits deemed by society to be socially significant, meaning that people treat other people differently because of them. For illustration, while conflicts and similarities in eye colour have not been treated as socially significant, differences and similarities in skin colour have. According to John H. Relethford, author of *The Fundamentals of Biological Anthropology*, race is a group of populations that share some biological characteristics.... These populations differ from other groups of populations according to these characteristics.

"Gender refers to the social attributes and opportunities connected with being male and female, the relationships between women and men and girls and boys, and the relations between women and between human beings. These attributes, opportunities and relationships are socially constructed and read through the acculturation processes" (Collins 6).

### Race, Class and Gender in Sula

Many aspects of race, class, and gender have been discussed in Morrison's text by critics, but this paper highlights Sula and Nel's progression through life as they become aware of their limitations as black women and realise that whiteness has the greatest influence on their progress toward selfhood. Furthermore, my analysis demonstrates how Morrison employs symbolism and imagery to demonstrate the power of white society, as well as how Sula and Nel become increasingly aware of the fact that the barriers white society has erected against them differ depending on their social positions, but that all of the barriers are nearly impossible to overcome in the end.

Furthermore, the impact of whiteness and the demands to adhere to what society defines as conventional female roles starts at home, as mothers pass down expectations, or, in Sula's case, do not pass down expectations, for her daughters to conform to the norm. Women are constantly encouraged to find power and happiness in their private lives, while males continue to wield power in the public arena, perpetuating the cycle of women's gender expectations and white dominance. Morrison's writing vividly portrays this cycle. Sula and Nel have fought an unachievable standard of the perfect heterosexual wife and mother based on white society's myths their whole lives. The criteria by which Sula and Nel are evaluated are based on the ideas of the white "norm," rather than any distinctiveness connected to their ethnicity.

One must look at some of the reasons that precede my viewpoint, which I will elaborate on in this chapter, in order to grasp the current condition of criticism as it pertains to these issues and Morrison's work. The impact of white society on the characters and its influence on the limitations they face is one of the major focuses of this thesis, particularly this chapter. In her essay "Self, Society, and Myth in Toni Morrison's Fiction," Cynthia A. Davis discusses this subject. According to Davis,

They [Sula and Nel] are also black women in a society whose female ideal is a white "doll baby," blonde and blue-eyed Shirley Temple. Even if they accept their reification, they will always be inadequate; the black woman is "the antithesis of American beauty." No efforts at disguise will make them into the images they learn to admire. Defined as the Other, made to be looked at, they can never satisfy the gaze of society. (329)

In regard to the "white equals normal" effect, Davis talks directly about Sula. Furthermore, Davis explicitly states that Sula and Nel will never "satisfy society's gaze" because they are black. Davis' remark parallels Richard Dyer's argument on the perils of white privilege: If whiteness means normalcy, then all races must aim towards whiteness in order to be accepted. Although I agree with Davis' and Dyer's positions, I believe Sula has a larger effect on the girls' freedom. Davis' observation is just one part of a larger picture that includes gender norms, white influences, and socioeconomic conflicts. In a society based on segregation and isolation, Nel and Sula strive to identify themselves. The combination of whiteness and social status produces an unreasonable expectation

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of belonging to a culture that reflects the white social norm and is devoid of black culture's distinctive customs. Furthermore, these expectations contribute to the standards of feminine beauty. White culture not only tries to rob Sula and Nel of their black origins, but it also promotes the feminine body standards to which Sula and Nel are continually compared.

This topic of Sula is by no means representative of how non-white women are affected throughout the United States, but it is a fascinating subject and depiction of how race, class, and gender are portrayed and viewed within a community. Patricia Hill Collins examines the connection between the African-American community and the African-American person in her article "Some Group Matters." Collins' idea of African American individuality serves as the foundation for my observations of Morrison's text and interpretation of Morrison's social criticism. She asserts,

One might wonder whether African-Americans live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests, and their culture from those of other classes, or whether they continue to bear the intergenerational costs of citizenship denial stemming from their being labelled "a subordinate and inferior class of beings. For African-Americans, group personality is defined more by real lived Black experience than by theoretical categories created under assumptions of different discourses of class or race. (72).

Collins' analysis is crucial to the debate of Sula in terms of class, racism, and gender since it is apparent that personal experience outweighs presumptive ideas about class and race. I believe that Sula and Nel's unique encounters with white culture, or lack thereof, shape their personalities and paths. In line with Collins' thesis, I contend that Sula and Nel have distinct experiences with gender roles and relationships as a result of their family makeup and social status. Individual behaviours are driven by their distance from or closeness to the centre of influence, which in the Bottom is white civilization. Because there is less compulsion to comply, those from lower social classes are less affected by white culture. Nel's family is most closely classified as a black, middle-class household, as described in Medallion. As a consequence, Helene, Nel's mother, aspires to be the stereotypical white middle-class wife and mother. She is the stereotypical heterosexual wife and mother. Sula, on the other hand, comes from a lower-class family that is the polar opposite of the traditional middle-class family. Sula's mother and grandmother have many male partners, none of whom reside in the Peace house, and they seem unconcerned by their resemblance to a white, middle-class house on the surface. Sula and Nel want to be different and to "find something else to be" as young women, but their socioeconomic disparities provide new difficulties and possibilities for freedom. Neither lady finds it easy to confront society, and they both face difficulties as a result of their race. Whiteness infiltrates Sula and Nel's lives and acts as an outside force trying to destroy their individuality, but their responses are dependent on their social class, and this is what eventually separates their courses in life.

Morrison uses Sula and Nel to symbolise the force of whiteness, the impact of class, and the individuality that comes with individual experience, but she also uses the Bottom, their home, to illustrate how all of these things come together. Collins draws an intriguing connection between the personal identities he mentions and the cultural identity of a black community in The Bottom. Morrison explains

...it wasn't even a town; it was just a neighbourhood where, on quiet days, people in the valley houses could hear singing, banjos, and, if a valley man had business up in those hills—collecting rent or insurance payment—he might see a woman in a flowered dress doing a bit of a cakewalk, a bit of black bottom, a bit of "messing around" to the lively notes of the mouth organ. The saffron dust that drifted down on the man's coverall sand bunion-split shoes as he breathed in and out of his harmonica would be raised by her bare feet. The black folks who were observing her would chuckle and massage their knees, and it would be easy for the valley guy to miss the grownup agony that was hidden behind her eyes. (4)

Morrison's detailed depiction of the Bottom creates a vivid image of the inhabitants' characters, and this paragraph illustrates how many white visitors may only see one aspect of the locals. The guy from the valley is unaware that there is suffering and struggle inside this apparently happy society. Outsiders are unaware of the depths to which the inhabitants of the Bottom have sunk. Individual experiences of community members

contribute to the creation of a distinct environment and culture. Whiteness creeps into the Bottom throughout the book, and Morrison vividly illustrates how whiteness eventually destroys the Bottom's distinctiveness, a community formed by its unique people and their experiences. Morrison starts the book by explicitly saying that the Bottom no longer exists: "There was once a neighbourhood in that area, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to create way for the Medallion City Golf Course" (3). In the 1940s, a golf course, the ideal emblem of whiteness, maleness, and the upper-class lifestyle, forcefully eliminates everything that makes the Bottom distinct and exceptional.

Sula's drive and brave attitude challenges the gender and racial norms that white culture has imposed on her as the girls strive to discover "something else to be." In her article "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," gender and feminist theorist Judith Butler explains how acts mislead, depict, and represent gender.

Discrete genders are part of what "humanises" individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished...because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and there would be no gender at all without those acts. (522).

Gender, according to Butler, is socially created. What we call "man" or "female" is determined by one's behaviours, as well as what we've historically observed and informally created as a community. The males only have the "performative actions" that they have historically seen to compare Sula to when it comes to what a female "acts like." Sula's act of cutting her hand goes against the stereotypes of caring and mothering that woman are typically linked with. Sula's interaction with the Irish lads is only one of several situations in which Sula "fails to perform [her] gender," as Morrison puts it. Sula is far from the stereotypical white "Shirley Temple, baby doll" image, and by performing such an act, she further distances herself from the stereotype. Sula's lack of identity is the source of the lads' anxiety. Sula's performance does not correspond to her gender. Sula's capacity to depict something that others around her cannot classify gives her a certain air of mystery, which she will continue to demonstrate as an adult. Sula has the capacity to go beyond the socially created gender norm since she does not represent the socially constructed racial norm, whiteness, nor is she a member of a class that promotes a resemblance to whiteness.

Nel's decision is influenced by her experiences with her mother, and Sula's experiences with the maternal figures in her life, although radically different, also influence her decisions. The mother-daughter connections in Medallion are examples of how white society's gender standards influence relationships through generations, much as the Bottom serves as a symbol of a distinct black culture that middle-class, white society destroys. As a consequence, Nel is bound by many of the same expectations and duties that her mother was bound by. Nel's mother, on the other hand, constantly instils in her the desire to appear more "white." Helene attempts to shape her daughter into a more "white-like" lady, according to the ideal that Cynthia A. Davis mentions. Helene often encourages her kid to pick her nose and pin it shut at night. The process of "nose-pulling" was believed to make the nose more pointed, like that of a white lady, rather than the wide nose of an African-American. Helene also straightens Nel's hair on a daily basis so that she "looks beautiful." African-American hair is naturally curly and coarse, unlike white women's hair, which is straight. Helene wants Nel to look like a white lady, and she values Nel's physical beauty above her personal freedom or intellect. Helene thinks that a woman's social standing determines her success. Davis goes on to examine many of Morrison's books in order to expand on her assessment of such patterns.

## Conclusion

Sula and Nel's unique class differences allowed them some freedoms and limitations because of their closeness to white, middle-class society. For Nel, her mother's desire to be more like society's accepted white women leads her to blindly follow conventional gender roles and not question preconceptions of what a mother, wife, and woman should be. White society, on the other hand, had less of an impact on Sula's family since they were not from a middle-class background. For the most of her life, Sula's independence triumphs against the tyranny of female individuality in the Bottom. Although Sula's individuality is crushed by white, middle-class female standards in life, she finds peace and serenity in death, a place where she may really be free. For a short

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time, Nel's death grants her individual freedom, as she recognises that her genuine independence was gained in her connection with Sula and their defiance of socially imposed gender norms. Toni Morrison portrays Sula as a figure of rebellion and independence. Even in death, Sula strives for independence and a distinct personality that values individuality above conformity.

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