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**Retracing the Narrative of
Subalternity: Historical
Evolutions and New
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Retracing the Narrative of Subalternity: Historical Evolutions and New Applications

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Toni Morrison's *Sula*; A Study of Feminist View on Radical Revisions of Race and male Centered Afro- American Literary Tradition

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Abstract

Sula, the second novel of Toni Morrison, published in 1973, explores black Women's friendships. It broke away the previous stereotypes of the black female character in North American living tradition. *Sula* is a complex female character. Through this character, Toni Morrison goes beyond simplistic racial labels. She also explores the depths of human nature and human conflicts that blacks share with other races.

Introduction

The Scope of the paper is to analyze *Sula*'s feminist view on radical revisions of race and male-centred Afro- American literary tradition. Though this analysis contains elements of feminism, it also includes essential elements of psychoanalysis and deconstruction. The paper will also focus on how love and death dissolve in the character of *Sula*.

Literature Review

The community is not just the setting for the novel. The Bottom town functions as a character in its way. The town functions as the collective conscience of the Bottom members. The relationship of *Sula* with the community is based on a love-hate situation. *Sula* is perfectly aware of it. She says that she is an outcast and believes that the hatred poured on her is only framed by the community. However, *Sula* thinks that if the community does not love her now, it will when the time comes. 'Oh, they' ll love me all right. It will take time, but they will love me' (45). Morrison believes that separation and division are not just psychological processes but a social one as the community functions as a judge for individual and group. For this same reason, *Sula* is set apart from the community.

Problematic Statements

The relationship between *Sula* and Nel is central to the theme of Morrison's novel. The relationship between *Sula* and Nel can be understood in McDowell's deconstructive approach in binary opposition. He views that Nel and *Sula* may at first glance appear to represent, for she believes that "*Sula* is rife with liberating possibilities in that it transgresses all deterministic structures of opposition". Specifically, this critic insightfully claims that "the novel invokes oppositions of good/evil, virgin/whore, self/other, but moves beyond them, avoiding the false choices they imply and dictate". During the narrative, the reader is presented with several descriptions of the *Sula*-Nel friendship. The readers believe that they complement each other. We also believe that that they are two parts of a single identity unit. It seems unnecessary to choose only one of these categorizations; on the contrary, one must attempt to move beyond them and come up with an Alternative. Then the statement of Mc Dowel's Proposal: "The relationship of other to self in this is the passage, and throughout the narrative must be seen as 'different but connected rather than separate and opposed,'

Beyond the relationships, *Sula*'s relationship with herself is fascinating to consider the dimension of love-hate or hate-love in the arena of *Sula*'s self-exploration and self-construction processes, especially since "*Sula* resists our search for the conventional 'unified sensibility or personality". Spillers studies the reaction of the reader when faced by such a worthy yet challenging character: "*Sula* is both loved and hated by the reader, embraced and rejected simultaneously because her audience is forced to accept the corruption of absolutes and what has been left in their place—the complex, alienated,

transitory gestures of a personality who has no framework of a moral reference *beyond or other than herself* [my italics]"p.67. In terms of the text, this last statement is the most evident in Sula's verbal encounter with Eva when she returns to the Bottom after her ten-year absence:

"Any more fires in this house, I am lighting them!"

"Hellfire does not need lighting, and it is already burning in you" "Whatever' s burning in me is mine!"

"And I will split this town in two and everything in it before I let you put it out!"

"Pride goth before a fall".

"What the hell do I care about falling?"

Sula, though, describes a powerful woman. Men highlight the strength of the female characters. The male characters in the novel seem to fit Chodorow's suggestion that "for boys, identification processes and masculine role learning are not likely to be embedded in relationship with their fathers or men but rather to involve the denial of affective relationship to their mothers".(8) The search for separation creates male identities, and as a result, they are less able to experience intimacy and interdependency. His profession symbolizes the position of Nel's father in the family life as a seaman. As a result of his job, he is absent from family life. The other prominent male figures in the novel, Boy-Boy, husband of Eva Peace, Jude, husband of Ne! and Ajax, Sula's lover, all leave their neighbourhood in Medallion when their relationships become problematic. The men in the novel who do not separate themselves from their mothers or the replacing mother figure seem to be unable to maintain a strong independent identity. The most prominent example is the three Deweys who live in Eva's house. At the novel's beginning, Eva took in children who lived under terrible circumstances and cared for them. However, Eva ignored the children's names and called all three Dewey. After a while, the identities of the three boys merged into one, and no one could tell them apart afterwards. The Deweys remain boys during the book because when Sula returns to Medallion, they still live in Eva's house and need to be taken care of. They never grow up to be adult men and never detach themselves from Eva. Besides the Deweys, Eva's house harbours more men, namely Tar Baby and son Plum. Like Plum, Tar Baby is addicted, and because of this, she never turns into an independent adult male. Morrison's women-centred description leaves nearly all men "impoverished in their ability to relate to others". The men in the novel only play a secondary role. One exception to this rule is Shadrack, the opening character of the book and the village idiot. Unlike the other male characters, he does take part in the community, but from a respective distance, and without addressing the other inhabitants directly.

Methodology

The novel will be read first. The bibliographies related to the topic will be discovered on the internet. Magazines, reviews, papers, doctoral thesis and secondary sources in print will be read appropriately. Important text passages and ideas related to the topic will be noted down to convey relatively. Later gathered ideas and thoughts would be organized and applied to justify the title with references.

Discussions and Results

The novel, though, talks about the relationship between mothers and daughters, and future and past. The novel "offers a view of female psychological development that traditional male-centred interpretations of female development and calls out for an expansion of the women-centred paradigms". As stated before, most feminist psychoanalytical theories focus on the experiences of white middle-class women. In recent discussions, an ethnic dimension has been added, which has also been reflected in the work of black novelists. Although these novelists are not participating in psychoanalysis, their texts suggest affiliation with these theories. In this context, it seems that Toni Morrison implicitly criticizes the white generalization by writing novels about doubly marginalized protagonists, who are both female and black. Many of her stories delineate the negative influence of racism and poverty on the mother-daughter relationship. In stressing this subject, Morrison's texts open the discussion on how the gendered, individual self results from a particular social context and stress the importance of society in the identity developments of the protagonists, which is similar to

the theories as created by Chodorow. However, Morrison's novels suggest that the influence of society on the mothering process occurs differently from what the theories claim. As mentioned before, there is disagreement on how societal, racial and class factors are related to the development of the identities of men and women.

Some theorists argue that these variables could be considered separately, whereas others state that race and class are tightly intertwined in the mothering process. The influence of variables such as race and class in society, in general, is considered to be of great importance to the development of identity and the mother/daughter relationship of the female protagonists in the novel. In *Sula*, Morrison depicts the influence of class by exploring the mother-daughter relationship in a middle-class family, the Wrights, and a lower-class family. In both families, the mother/daughter relationships suffer from race and class problems. Eva Peace cannot provide the motherly love that her daughter Hannah needs. In a society where circumstances are harsh for a mother without a husband, let alone a black mother, survival is prioritized. Because of race and class influences, Eva could not wholly focus on the mothering process, which infected the personal involvement with her daughter, Hannah. Hannah, in turn, never learned how to mother herself and fails to connect with her daughter, continuing the same process in *Sula*.

Summation

In the novel, *Sula* clearly explains the inequality between the sexes, which functions as a destructive agent in the relationships between men and women and between women themselves. The friendship between Nel and Sula is ruined by Sula's inability to follow the gender codes in society. Sula's distorted view of love and sexuality, which is handed down to her through her immediate environment as a child, is the reason for the licentious behaviour that turns her into an outcast who, in the end, dies alone and destitute. It is within the realm of female friendship, first and foremost, that the problems of gender and sexuality can be read.

According to Suranyi, it is apparent that the central concern of the novel is that of black female bonding. She argues further that this black-female bonding has lesbian connotations but points out at the same time that Morrison herself disagrees. According to Morrison, it is not a lesbian relationship the novel focuses on but rather on the friendship between women—which is special. "In the absence of close bonds with one or both parents, a child seeks some other person who will satisfy the need for a deep, abiding emotional attachment". Rubenstein alludes to how both Nel and Sula intensely need a friend when small, neither having close bonds with their parents, which is also the case of the friendship between Christine and Heed in *Love*. The ending of the novel is particularly interesting in this respect, where the true closeness of the friendship between Nel and Sula is expressed in Nel's long cry for Sula when she realizes that it was not Jude she missed all those years, but Sula, her childhood friend:

A softball of fur broke and scattered like dandelion spores in the breeze.

"All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude". "We were girls together," she said. "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. ("Quote by Toni Morrison: "It was a fine cry - loud and long ...")

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