

CHAPTER III

**SULA:
SEARCH FOR BLACK-SELF IN THE
CONTEXT OF COMMUNITY**

Sula, the second novel under study published in 1973; provides a meaningful perspective through character typology on a key question : what happens when a woman, setting aside standard definitions of femininity , enters into traditionally masculine territory? The answer appears to be that she suffers repercussions, some form of defeat.

The novel depicts the quest of the protagonist Sula, who aspires to create her own self and then comes to terms with her identity as a black and female. Through her, Morrison has tried to demonstrate the difficulties that black women face when they try to explore different aspects of their self in totally hostile environment of American society.

I

Sula : Searcher of Selfhood

Toni Morrison has created an unusual world in the novel. Sula lives in a place called Bottom, Medallion city, Ohio. The Bottom has originated in the tricky economics of Afro-American slavery. In fact the Bottom is the top of the hill that a white slavemaster did not want to relinquish to a former slave. Thus, its present inhabitants have come to think of it as "a joke, a nigger joke" (4). They think of it in no other way because, for them, laughter is one way of dealing with their pain. Their endurance and their desire for survival have compelled them to value consistency and

control. It is their another way of dealing with contradictions. The bottomites and their environment show the rich tradition of black folktales and legend, which also serves another purpose : Unlike The Bluest Eye , the inhabitants of "the Bottom" are not often prey to the extreme seduction of a dominant culture. Instead they are presented as having a world of their own. /

The community of the Bottom is not only a place but a presence, a kind of collective conscience that arbitrates the social and moral norms of its members. It tolerates certain kind of eccentricity believing that magic, dreams and inexplicable forces operate in unpredictable way. Yet , it is also punitive to those who step absolutely outside the boundaries of the community. The Bottom has its own way of dealing with crazies like Shad rack, witches like Sula and the white folk. That is, they have their own taste for scapegoats and pariahs.

And in this community Sula tries to search her "self". Sula becomes conscious of being black and female in the course of the novel. As Sula knows that there is no love left for the black women, she tries to attain self-love, she does what pleases her, though she is discarded as a pariah by the society. In doing so, she defies the societal norms and tries to live unto the standards that she wants to create for herself. The freedom that Sula achieves is in fact much a prison as it is liberation. L

Totally free, she becomes obsessed with herself. She cannot love anything. She is also not content with the normal rules and boundaries. Still she persists in her struggle to establish her identity.

Sula grows up in a household pulsing with activities and larger than-life people. She lives with her powerful and probably sorceress grandmother Eva and her gentle mother Hannah who is devoted almost wholly to the practice and pleasure of sensuality. It is out of this recklessness that Sula emerges and becomes a threat to the community of the Bottom.

Sula's inappropriate response after Hannah's death reveals her emotional paralysis:

I didn't mean anything. I never meant anything. I stood there watching her burn and was thrilled (147).

Her words also suggest another meaning : having misunderstood Hannah's overheard comment :

I love Sula , I just don't like her (57),

Sula has since believed that she never 'meant' anything to her own mother. Through such misunderstanding Sula becomes a kind of emotional orphan. She lacks a basic sense of belonging to others and to

the community. While the bottomites 'see' themselves more clearly through her, she cannot 'see' herself.

An alienation from home arouses in her a drive for self-knowledge, and she emerges as a unique woman :

Sula was distinctly different. Eva's arrogance and Hannah's self-indulgence merged in her ... she 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.

... And like any artist with no art form, she became dangerous (118-121).

Sula dismisses herself from the ties and codes that bind the people in Bottom. In her quest for 'selfhood', she defies the rules, codes, mores and customs which bring constraints on her life and behaviour. Consequently, her rebelliousness manifests itself in several ways. Unlike other Medallion women, including Eva and Hannah, Sula refuses to marry and raise a family. Moreover, as an insult to the Medallion women, she attends their church functions scantily dressed and "tries out" their husbands. Like Hannah, Sula sleeps with town's husbands, but unlike her mother who seemed to "Complementing the women, in a way, by wanting their husbands" (115), Sula discards them "without any excuse the men could swallow " (115).

Sula challenges the assumption that a woman should be the "tuck and hem" of a man's garment. Fighting tooth and nail against the fragmentation of herself by the double jeopardy of race and sex, she searches for and achieves a 'wholeness' and a 'home' for herself. Sula believes in making her life her own. So when her grandmother, Eva, asks her about her marriage she replies :

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

From Hannah's casual enjoyment of men, Sula has learnt that, "Sex was pleasant and frequent, but otherwise unremarkable"(44). In the beginning, love-making seems to her, the creation of a special kind of joy; but gradually she realizes that

... in the center of that silence was not eternity but the death of time and a loneliness so profound the world itself had no meaning (123).

She has also realized that

... a lover was not a comrade and could never be ... for a woman. And that no one would ever be that version of herself which she sought he reach out to ... (121).

So after love making, she wants her partner to turn away and leave her to the "... privateness in which she met herself, welcomed herself, and joined herself in matchless harmony " (123).

Thus Sula is more interested in creating her own self rather than indulging in sexual gratification. Through sex, she tries to find another version of her 'self'. She knows no alienation as she is imbued with more than her share of funkiness. As Susan Willis says :

Morrison's aim in writing is very often to disrupt alienation with what she calls eruptions of 'funk'. It is an antidote to the black woman's "loss of spontaneity and sensuality."¹

Having dared to smash the taboos, Sula is scorned, despised and abandoned by the Bottom people. Like Shad rack, Sula becomes pariah. The crazy Shad rack is a victim of both physical and mental wounds from his service in the first world war. The community identifies her with evil forces, and connects her to multitude of sins ---- sending Eva to a nursing home, sleeping with Nel's husband and white men. No doubt, Sula becomes the evil scapegoat and common enemy for the Bottom. Her return after ten years absence, itself is connected with 'plague of robins' by the community. Thus Sula till her death, remains a sinister force, a figure of darkness and betrayal. Like her birthmark, Sula becomes the center of ambivalence in the novel that both attracts and repels, because, as Banyawa-Horne contends :

Sula is ... an exploration of that dimension of the feminine psyche or self which is often hidden from view because it is scarcity and too problematic to deal with .²

But no one realizes Sula 's acute loneliness and emotional aridity. All her attempts for quiltless and egoless life ironically lead her not to her self identity or community, but to an ultimate sense of solitude and isolation. Her experimental life leads her to ostracism, loneliness and ultimately to death. Thus, dissociated from the community, she becomes dissociated from herself too. Like Pecola Breedlove, Sula , along with Shad rack provides a negative energy against which members of the community test their own values. To live with the social disorder, as Shad rack creates an order through his National Suicide Day which is a simple ritual performed on each January Third, Sula through her rebelliousness brings unity in the community. In fact both are unequivocal "Public wrong" against which the Bottom defines it right. Here Morrison throws light on the attitude of the black people. They think that evil has a natural place in the universe; and so they do not wish to eradicate it. They just wish to protect themselves from it but they never want to kill it. For them, evil is another aspect of life.

Thus, Sula 's life may not be a tale of success; yet she leads an independent life and pursues her own course of freedom. In doing so she is destroyed, yet she achieves a rare personhood which none of the Bottom women ever dared to achieve by defying the role models set for them. In her last conversation with Nel, she reveals that, she has retained her sense of being : "But my lonely is mine" (143). Sula further shows

the place of "a woman" in the community and feels triumphant of her own position. She says they (women) are

Dying. Just like me. But the difference is they dying like a stump. Me, I'm going down like one of those red-woods. I sure did live in this world (143).

After Sula's death, in a short time, the Bottom without its pariah begins to collapse upon itself. Though initially, taken as a sign of better times, Sula's death brings troubles for the community. The Bottom can not use the strength of the evil one. As a result, the people adopt selfish and antagonistic ways. This condition is exacerbated when they do not get the jobs promised by the whites. Finally, on Suicide Day, these frustrated blacks join Shadrack's parade towards the tunnel, which end in their death. Thus the unity is soon dissolved which the opposition of Sula had brought to them.

Thus in death as well as in life, Sula remains a force for change in the community which presents both negative and positive reifications. Sula heralds a new millenium. She is the precursor of the glaring future of the world. Thus Sula is an instrument of Morrison's apocalyptic vision that gives direction for the future of the community.

II

Sula and Nel : Complementary Personalities

Morrison brings out the predominant traits of Sula's personality by providing another character, Nel Wright, Sula's childhood friend. Sula Peace and Nel Wright are each half of a figurative whole self. In this connection Morrison says that there is :

... a little bit of both in each of those women, and ... if they have been one person, I suppose they would have been a rather marvelous person. But each lacked something that the other one had. ³

The girls' respective houses are analogues of both boundary and complementarity. Sula's ancestry is counterpoint to that of Nel's. The tone of their houses emphasizes the contrast. Sula loves the tidiness and material extravagance of Nel's house; Nel covets the disheveled atmosphere of Sula's house cum bedlam.

Sula and Nel are products of their different styles of childrearing. The female relatives of the impressionable twelve-year-old girls influence the development of their friendship. Simultaneously, these growing teenagers are

... Solitary little girls whose loneliness was so profound it intoxicated them and sent them stumbling into Technicolor visions that always included a presence, a someone, who, quite like the dreamer, shared the delight of the dream (51).

Sula lives a solitary life in her house. Her family is the source of her independence of mind and sexual nonchalance. Her mother Hannah, known for her sexual generosity, is hardly aware of her only daughter Sula's need for emotional nurturance. Nel, on the other hand, is raised in a well-ordered but repressive household. Her mother, a high-tone lady is highly class-conscious. She manipulates and turns young Nel into an obedient daughter, driving her imagination "underground." Helene's own repressed upbringing and her learned repressive reaction to her daughter's upbringing represents what Mary Helene Washington in her Black-Eyed Susans calls

... Psychic violence that alienate (black women) from their roots and cuts them off from real contact with their own people and also from a part of themselves.⁴

Thus, Sula and Nel are isolated from their mothers as well as from their incomprehensible fathers. Their emotional alienation brings them to each other. As only-girl children, each takes the other as sister, sharing each others dreams of freedom and excitement : "... they found in each others eyes the intimacy they were looking for" (52).

In fact, Sula and Nel are the two faces of the same coin. Naturally in the company of each other, they discover their consciousness, start to learn who they are and what they want to do individually and collectively. They find in each other something they like intimately :

... 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. Their meeting was fortunate, for it let them use each other to grow on (52).

Sula makes relentless efforts to make herself, and to attain and appreciate her unified black female self, when she misinterprets her mother's comments. And Nel declares her difference : "I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me"(28), when she witnesses her mother's insult by the "male eyes" of white train conductor. Thus, Sula and Nel develop a "spiritual bond"⁵ with each other. As Naana Banyiswa - Horne says they :

... experience total harmony when they are together.⁶

More importantly, they offer each other a kind of security that neither finds in her own family. However, these two girls share strong bonds though they are different. Sula who is adventurer, often allows 'her emotions dictate her behaviour'; whereas Nel is more cautious and consistent. As a result, Nel remains within the community and Sula remains a social outsider.

Nel participates in the orthodox rites of the Bottom : marriage maternity and childbirth. Nel accepts this new identity because, "... greater than her friendship was this new feelings of being needed by

someone... *(84). But once Nel marries, Sula feels alienated from Nel.

Here Banyiwá-Horne comments :

Separately they function poorly.⁷

Once these girls are set out of the safe harbour of each other's company, their home training reasserts itself to dominate their lives. The anchor and orderliness that Sula finds in Nel's presence vanishes when she is alone. In the same way, the fanciful and imaginative Nel becomes more self-conscious when Sula leaves. After Nel's marriage, Sula searches for experience outside her town Bottom, for ten years in cities, colleges and in the company of men. Her quest is to fill the empty spaces, both without and within.

When Sula returns, Nel's world once again becomes magical and interesting. She feels different :

It was like getting the use of an eye back, having a cataract removed (95).

Nel sees in Sula her other-self, a self which she has long buried in respectability. But Nel's sense of newness and redefinition shatters when Sula sleeps with her husband, Jude. In fact, in her unconventional view of life, Sula makes a distinction between sex and friendship. For her, sex, though "pleasant and frequent", is "unremarkable", unlike her friendship with Nel. What Sula does for Nel, as she has always done in

their friendship, is to share her experimental knowledge with her. In one, stroke, Nel loses the base of her emotional life, her husband and her only friend, Sula. Consequently, their relationship freezes to death. Sula is hurt because Nel becomes dead like the rest of the town.

Like other Bottomites, Nel criticises Sula's independence; she says :

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 (142).

The way Nel accuses Sula, shows her conventional attitude. She believes in the boundaries set by the community. For her, a woman, that too a coloured woman should know her limits and should behave according to them. But Sula's reaction to Nel's accusation is totally different. Their conversation illuminates the difference between their philosophies. As Sula says :

I know what every colored woman in this country is doing (143).

Although Sula and Nel have taken opposite paths, they are both dying. Sula is struck down for attempting both exploration and conformity; Nel, for her self-diminishing wish for respectability and survival. In the end, Sula dies without finding fulfilment and a self-sustaining focus in her life. However, she says to Nel, "Girl I got my mind" (143). Sula dies due to spiritual malnutrition.

After Sula's death, Nel realizes the emptiness she had felt all of these years was not the pain of Jude's absence but that of Sula's. She reflects :

... all that time, I thought I was missing Jude. ... We was girls together, ... O Lord, Sula, ... girl, girl, ... (174).

Thus, Nel loses the force, the potentiality which had given her an opportunity to go beyond the Bottom's narrow principles of survival. If she and the Bottom had sought to understand what Sula meant and had explored the possibilities of life, perhaps Sula might have survived. Nel may have continued to explore her potentialities.

III

Sula -Eva : 'Self-created' Peace Women

As Helene Wright, the light-skinned lady has the most dubious background, so the Peace women are convoluted, marvelous folk. Eva Peace is arrogant, independent, decidedly a man lover who loves and hates intensely. She is a symbol of the will to survive. In contrast to the self-reflective "oppressive neatness" of the Wright home, the Peace house reflects disorderliness and complexity of the women who live there. Eva's household typifies a kind of angularity in her life, what Zora Neale Hurston defines as the Afro-American determination "to avoid the strait line."⁸ Eva encourages a communal atmosphere to develop around her by welcoming

all outsiders. In fact her affinity to the people has sprung from a past life of abandonment and deprivation. Hers is a 'woman centered universe' where she lives with the values that are beneficial to women.

And Sula is born in a family where the women reign supreme. She grows up in the house, where Eva, her grandmother acts as a taker and giver of life. There are striking similarities within Sula's and Eva's respective life-cycles. Both assert themselves through an act of self-mutilation.

Sula's and Eva's self-mutilation shows their direct confrontation with the oppressive social forces inherent in white domination. It intensifies the potential for expressing freedom. For Sula and Eva, self-mutilation brings about the redefinition of their individual self. With this they occupy a radically different social space.

When, as an adolescent, Sula is confronted by a band of teenage Irish bullies, she draws a knife. Instead of threatening the boys with it, she whacks off the tip of her own finger. This act of self wounding is coupled with warning :

If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I'll do to you ?
(54-55)

Thus, Sula's self-mutilation symbolizes castration and directly contests with white male sexual domination of black women. Sula's act represents

the refusal to accept and cower in the face of racial and masculine domination.

Sula's act of self-mutilation has its precedent in her grand-mother's solution to a similar conformation with dominant society. Though their motive behind the self-mutilation is different it shows their endeavour to assert their identity. Eva dares to get her leg cut under a train in order to save the lives of her children. By doing this she collects the insurance money and maintains her family with dignity.

They both cause the death of another : Eva kills her son Plum, while Sula causes chicken Little's death in the river. Each one is abandoned by a man --- Eva by her husband BoyBoy, Sula by Ajax, and each disappears for a spell from Medallion : Eva when her children are small, Sula after Nel's marriage. Both are figures of lawlessness, and both are ultimately exiles : Sula within the community, and Eva outside it when Sula places her in an old-age home.

Yet Eva and Sula , as being self-created have different attitudes toward life. The Bottom is central to Eva's life, while Sula dismisses herself from the ties and codes that bind the people in Bottom. Eva never negates the world around her. Unlike Sula, she faces life head-on, actively challenging the forces of destruction that shape her life.

Like Eva, Sula is tough, ornery and nippy. Sula has inherited the need for independence, arrogance, oneriness, partially from Eva who had the gall to destroy her only son Plum to save his maleness. So Sula's first action upon her return to the Bottom is to dethrone the haughty mistress of the house, with whom she had never good relations.

Sula's rebellious nature has made her so thoughtless that she breaks her friend's marriage. On the contrary Eva's killing of Plum is accompanied by passionate conviction. Having fought so hard to save and bring him up, she cannot see his surrender in the face of life. She says,

I had to keep him out so I just thought of a way he could die like a man, not all scrunched up inside my womb, but like a man (72).

Eva is not simply destructive. Though she burns Plum, one-legged as she is, jumps from a third floor window to save her burning daughter, while Sula simply watches as her mother's body twitches on the ground.

Though Sula has courage enough to defy the taboos of the community, she loses the sense of life when Ajax, her friend walks away from her. Soon she retreats behind self-pitying images of paper-dolls. On the contrary, Eva responds combatively to her abandonment by Boyboy, her husband and mobilizes the full energy of her hatred to redefine herself, reigning supreme from her upstairs room. And more

significantly, unlike Sula who rarely tries to understand even herself, Eva's insight and uncanny knowledge range beyond her singular self. Indeed, Morrison has explored Eva's inner potency, through Sula's failed journey to selfhood.

IV

Sula's Ambivalent Quest For Identity

Sula and Ajax's love relationship emerges as the fullest communication between a man and woman in Morrison's work. As persons, they are well suited to each other. Ajax, handsome and heroic as his name implies, has been the object of Nel and Sula's adolescent dreams. Ajax loves two things in the world, that is he likes women who are physically and mentally interesting secondly he likes airplanes. Like Sula, he resists limitations and ties.

In their first encounter, Ajax swallows Sula's purity by drinking the milk in her presence and that action initiates her falling in love with him. When Sula makes love to him she envisages the very essence of his maleness. In him she sees the very soil of creation. That is, in Ajax's company, Sula tries to create her 'self'.

Sula is made to feel beautiful by Ajax, who recognizes the pain and suffering inherent in her imperfections and consequently finds them

endearing. Through Ajax, Sula discovers the need for consistency and control. On the other hand, Ajax visits Sula because

Her elusiveness and indifference to establish habits of behaviour remind him of his mother... (127),

and because he suspects that

... this was perhaps the only other woman he knew whose life was her own, who could deal with life efficiently, and who was not interested in nailing him (127).

Their relationship is further solidified because they have genuine conversation, the real pleasure, that Sula is seeking. Sula is pleased because Ajax treats her as an equal :

He did not speak down to her, nor content himself with puerile questions about her life or monologues of his own activities ... he seemed to expect brilliance from her, and she delivered ... he listened more than he spoke (127-128).

Ajax thinks of Sula as a self-sustaining individual. He believes that she is both tough and wise and so he does not feel need to protect her. They also compliment one another in their desire for adventure and free-flight.

Flying for Ajax symbolizes his desire not only to resist limitations, but to escape consistency and control; thus, in each other, the two lovers find another version of themselves. Moreover, Sula tries to depolarize the distance between herself and the community, and especially between herself and Nel by being possessive to Ajax. Having discovered the 'real

pleasure' Sula wants to keep it, possess it, always have it when she wants it. But the moment, dependence and possessiveness enter in their relationship, Ajax leaves Sula . Thus, Sula's quest ends in failure. The reason behind this is, ironically, Sula finds a man with whom she is free to be a woman with thoughts, plans and desires that are not wedded to sex. Moreover, Sula's surrender to Ajax places her inside the circle of women whom she had rejected and humiliated. She becomes possessive and begins to decorate herself. It shows her attempt to emphasize her body and not her mind which she valued. When Ajax realizes this, he leaves Sula .

In Ajax's absence, Sula , like Nel, experiences the similar pain of loss and change. She experiences the pain of absence which she had earlier unwittingly inflicted on her friend Nel. Thus she experiences :

An absence so decorative, so ornate, it was difficult for her to understand how she had ever endured, without falling dead ... , (134).

However, Sula is not completely defeated. After Ajax's departure, she sings the blues, songs of regret for a lost love. However, this is only temporary. In the final days of her life, she sings the song of both death and freedom that only a broken woman still bent on wholeness can sing. She dies slowly, as proud in death as she was in life.

Thus, Morrison's Sula is a memorable heroine who is 'a marvelously unconventional woman'. Her family background, and the conventions of the Bottom make her a rebel. Her rebellious nature gives her courage to defy the values of the community and explore her 'self'. Though proclaimed as pariah, she succeeds in her quest for self. Thus Sula probes more deeply for the origins of oppression, victimization, and social order. In the process it also explores, through the central character, Sula , the possibilities for negating such control in a very unique sense of the term.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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