

On Black Women's Quest for Self-identity in Toni Morrison's *Sula*

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Abstract: Toni Morrison's novel, *Sula*, depicts the self-identity quest of three black women, Eva, Sula and Nel, from men-centered consciousness acknowledgement to patriarchal oppression resistance and finally to the traditional black female fate transcendence. Based on the analysis of *Sula*, the author holds that the redefinition of black women's self-identity needs them to reaccept themselves, love themselves, and be well-equipped with extensive and profound knowledge. Only in this way, can they gain respect and love from the male, and eventually fight together for their rights and emancipation.

1. Introduction

In *sonnet 18*, Shakespeare says that his friend will be immortal in his verse even though he may grow old and gradually lose his beauty, which is the same as Sula in Toni Morrison's novel. Since *Sula* is published, it has stimulated much criticism and meditation which consequently makes *Sula* eternalized in the history of black literature. In *Sula*, as for black women's search for self-identity, Eva is the forerunner, Sula is the lonely practitioner and Nel is the successor. In *Sula*, black women enjoy few human rights and little dignity in their community. They are regarded more as tools for work and production than as a living creature. Due to the oppression from racism and sexism, they gradually lose their self-awareness and become victims of discrimination and oppression. Eva's awakening marks the beginning of black women's search for their selves, Sula's rebellion witnesses its development, and Nel's changes indicate the extension of black women's self-awareness. Sula and Nel can find a way out if they join together, which Morrison stated in an interview: "if they had been one person, I suppose they would have been a rather marvelous person. But each one lacked something the other one had." [1]

2. Black Women's Quest for Self-Identity in *Sula*

Eva Peace, Sula's grandmother, can be defined as black women's ancestor to explore the self. After being abandoned by her husband, Eva wins her economic independence without losing her courage for life. However, she still holds the idea that men are the center of women's life which ultimately leads to her failure in search for her true self. Sula, unlike her grandmother, chooses to "live an experimental life", which means she objects to sexist and racist oppression self-consciously. She not only tries to challenge the authoritative concept in black community, but also rejects every bit of black women's conventional role, which makes her a witch or crazy woman in black community. She is too radical and extreme in the process of finding her self-identity. Without the support from the black community, she cannot escape her destiny and accomplish her own self-fulfillment. Nel, Sula's best friend, grows up to be a traditional black woman, taking care of her husband, babies and doing households chores. The friendship between Nel and Sula is broken when Jude leaves Nel after he is found having sex with Sula. Several years after Sula's death, Nel eventually realizes the meaning of Sula's life. The failed but precious attempt Sula has made to search for her self-identity shocks Nel, which makes her start to reconsider her long-lost self.

2.1 Eva's Awakening

Eva married Boy-Boy and had three children. Five years later, Boy-Boy left in November, leaving Eva with 1.65\$, five eggs, three beets. The community helped her but Eva wasn't one to take handouts for very long. She finally left her three children with a neighbor. Eighteen months later, she came back with one leg, two crutches, and a monthly check in the mail. With this money, she built a new house in Carpenter Rd., which started her life of being an independent woman. This is typical among black women who are deserted by their husbands. Morrison once said in an interview: "Because of the dual responsibility that black women had—when their husbands left them, they didn't collapse. They didn't have crutches in the first place, so with nothing but themselves to rely on they must have to carry on. And that, I think, is absolutely extraordinary and marvelous." [2]

Maybe because Eva is too independent, she likes to arrange other's life, or to put it more exactly, she is despotic. The three Deweys are adopted by Eva when they are very young. Under the dominance of Eva, they speak with one voice, think with one mind, and maintain an annoying privacy. Meanwhile, Eva burns her son Plum to death, who gets addicted to heroin after coming back from war. Eva tells Hannah that she kills Plum because she loves him and she wants him to die like a man as he cannot live like a man. This can be seen as a special way for Eva to show her love for her children, while the scene that Eva tries to save Hannah who is caught on fire is heart-warming: "Eva knew there was time for nothing in this world other than the time it took to get there and cover her daughter's body with her own." [3]

Even though Eva is such a brave and independent person, she supports a conventional concept of marital relations, regrets the ineffectiveness of the patriarchal order and keeps black female traditions by accepting and enforcing them. It is her persistence that Sula should get married that makes Sula determine to send her to the nursing home. Hence, as Eva has been assimilated by the man-centered consciousness, the quest for black women's self-identity in the awakening-stage failed, but the spirit of fighting against difficulties and overcoming them in life is carried on.

2.2 Sula's Rebellion

Sula, the central character and the most disputable person in this novel, steps further than her grandmother in the process of seeking self. The image of Sula differs from those former ones in black novels, who both fears and hates the whites. Sula fights directly against those who bully her and totally abandons the traditional lifestyle of black women. She challenges conventions and the bottom of the society by doing incredible things.

There are two things that are very important in the formation of Sula's experimental character. One is Sula overhears that her mother does not like her. This makes Sula know even the closest person cannot be trusted. The other event is a black child Chicken Little's sudden death which is caused directly by Sula and her best friend Nel. This makes Sula realize that she herself is not trustworthy. Additionally, the social background and family background play important roles in forming her character. Sula's mother, Hannah, likes to have sex with the willing men of the bottom and she just cannot live without man. These plant the roots in Sula's heart that man is just a tool. Eva's arrogance and Hannah's self-indulgence merge in her, and with all her own imagination, she lives out her ways exploring her own thoughts and emotions, giving them full reign, feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure please her. Her life is experimental.

At first, Sula tries to search for someone that can understand her outside the Bottom. When Nel gets married, Sula leaves the Bottom for ten years to gain higher education and search for self. But the real life outside the Bottom brings nothing but disappointment to her. All those cities have the same people, working the same mouths, sweating the same sweat. Whenever she introduces her private thoughts to them, they hood their eyes. They teach her nothing but tricks, share nothing but worry, give nothing but money. She has been looking all along for a friend, and it takes her a while to discover that a lover is not a comrade and could never be—for a woman. After the dream of finding a male friend disillusions, Sula determines to find her "self". And this time, she turns to the Bottom.

After Sula comes back from her ten-year trip, the first thing she does is to have a quarrel with her

grandma. Eva persists that Sula has to get married while Sula retorts that she needs Eva to shut her mouth. Sula finally puts Eva out to nursing home. This is the real start of Sula's disconnection with black traditions. Like Hannah, Sula sleeps with the husbands of her neighbors indiscriminately. She sleeps with them once and discards them forever. She tries to reach her "self" in the process of having sex. This irresponsible behavior finally leads to her breakup with Nel. Sula sleeps with Jude and abandons him right away as there is no love between them. She also fails to know the bitterness she has brought to Nel in this affair. That's why she is thought to be peculiar and crazy in the eyes of people in the Bottom. Her own behaviors make her a lonely person who has abandoned the black community and also be abandoned by the black community in searching for herself.

For black people in the Bottom, even though they consider Sula to be evil, they never want to destroy her. Toni Morrison has once analyzed the black's view of evil. "They think evil has got its natural position in the universe, of which they don't try to get rid. They only hope to protect themselves from being hurt, even maybe want to control but never think about destroying it. They think evil is only part of life.[4] This can explain the strange scene that appears in the Bottom—when Sula comes back, they begin to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their mind. The Bottom has achieved unprecedented harmony.

Sula's odd behavior shocks the Bottom deeply and suddenly. As time goes by, blacks gradually realize the concept of resistance and start to fight for their rights. But at the time when Sula is trying hard to find herself, nobody understands her, and nobody joins her. She is alone and despised all the way. So she is destined to fail in the way to find herself. Several decades later, however, that black people hold a strike for their working rights represents the long affirmative influence from Sula's spirit of resisting conventional destiny and seeking for the self.

2.3 Nel's Changes

Nel has once developed her self-consciousness when she was a child. As she grows up, under the influence of her mother, she gradually becomes the typical woman of the Bottom, who stands for the community. Sula, on the contrary, violates all the norms and beliefs of the Bottom. The contradiction between Sula and Nel can be seen as the contradiction between Sula and black community, the former one is resistant and feeble, the latter is conservative and strong. Several years after Sula's death, Nel eventually understands Sula, which means the acceptance of Sula's spirit in black community.

Nel is taught to be an obedient girl by her mother, Helene, but one accident makes her think of herself for the first time. It is on the train to her grandmother's, Helene is discriminated and insulted by the train conductor for she has walked into the white zone. Moreover, Nel and her mother cannot find restroom in Birmingham and have to find a field of high grass to solve their problems. Being black and female, young Nel begins to doubt her original life meaning and determines to live a life of her own and not to be looked down upon by others. After that, she starts to reflect on herself. "I'm me," she whispers. "Me". "I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me." [3] When meeting Sula, Nel is immediately encouraged to reflect on herself. They become best friends, and they play together, enjoy their body pleasure of development, witness the drowning of Chicken Little, and share everything even the kiss of boys. Their friendship is so intense that they become two throats and one eye. But things have changed since Nel gets married, which also starts the different journey for the two girls.

After ten year's departure, marriage has changed Nel so much that she even preaches to Sula. Instead of living a splendid life, Nel now is convinced that she is a black woman and should do things according to her status. After becoming a housewife and mother, Nel has gradually become one who never thinks of herself. Her husband and children become the whole value of her bit by bit in a boring but steady life. Since then, what Nel does is exactly corresponding to conventional demands in the Bottom community. It is Sula's adultery with her husband that eventually shocks Nel, who cares too much for others, but is abandoned by her husband. The leaving of her husband gives Nel a death-like blow, leaving her in endless pains and hardships emotionally, physically, and financially. Fortunately, the conversation with Eva makes Nel begin to rethink about Sula and herself. She finally finds out

that all these years what she misses so much is not the loss of her husband but the absence of Sula and their friendship. She goes to mourn at Sula's gravestone: "'all that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude.' And the loss pressed down on Nel's chest and came up into her throat. 'We was girls together,' she said as though explaining something. 'O Lord, Sula,' she cried, 'girl, girl, girl, girl, girl.'" [3] This is Nel's epiphany of her true self and authentic feelings. Nel now knows that Sula is right in loving herself.

3. Possible Ways to Black Women's Quest for Self

Even though Sula is a brave practitioner in defining herself, she tries to reach her true self by breaking the black female traditions. Nel, on the contrary, defers to all black traditions without caring for herself. To put it more clearly, Sula stands for the power of self-epiphany while Nel stands for the black community. Only when the two are combined, can black women have the hope for the realization of their emancipation.

Toni Morrison once said in an interview, "if black women want to achieve their self, they must learn to accept themselves and love themselves. They must love their skin, their eyes, their accent, their body, their language and their culture." [5] The acceptance and love of themselves is the essence of the quest for their self-identity. This is the first step. Then, if black women want to realize their liberation at full scale, they must put education in the first place. With enough education, they can understand their own culture, and express their own ideas in a more incisive way and gradually rebuild their self-identity. And last, if black women can gain support from the whole society, the realization of their liberation will be on the way. Morrison has set a good example in this aspect. She is a great black author who knows a lot of black tradition and sticks to it. One person's power is limited, but the power of a community is limitless. This solidarity is the basis of black women's emancipation.

4. Conclusion

Morrison said, "As a black and a woman, I have had access to a range of emotions and perceptions that were unavailable to people who were neither." [6] She can feel all kinds of bitterness which the black have suffered. In *Sula*, from Eva's awakening of self-consciousness to Sula's resistance to patriarchy, and finally to Nel's transcendence to women's traditional destiny—this development at three stages displays precisely the hardships black women experienced in the process of search for their self-identity. Only when black women have achieved their independence, will black men understand and respect them. Only when black men and women can achieve mutual regards and harmony and consociate tightly with each other, can they fight against racial discrimination from the outside effectively. To fulfill these goals black women must develop a new idea about their self-identity—who they are, what they can do, what they should do, and what they want to acquire in their life. This new idea can grow only if they can accept themselves and love themselves, get good education to improve their abilities and develop a new world view, carry on good aspects of their tradition and be closely tied and united with black community.

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