



Study about relationships between mothers and daughters in *Sula* in the novel of Toni Morrison

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Abstract : *Sula* was integral to the formation of black feminist literary criticism. In 1977, black feminist literary critic Barbara Smith, in her essay "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism," advanced a definition of black feminist literary criticism and (in) famously performed a lesbian reading of *Sula*. In her 1980 essay "New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism," Black feminist literary critic Deborah McDowell responded to Smith's challenge by acknowledging the need for a black feminist criticism and calling for a firmer definition of black feminism.

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Introduction : The Bottom is a mostly black neighborhood in Ohio. A white farmer promised freedom and a piece of Bottom land to his slave if he would perform some very difficult chores. When the slave completed the work, he asked the farmer to keep his end of the bargain. Freedom was easy, the farmer had no objection to that, but he didn't want to give up any land, so he told the slave that he was very sorry that he had to give him valley land. He had hoped to give him a piece of the bottom land. The slave blinked and said he thought valley land was bottom land. The master said, "Oh no! See those hills? That's bottom land; rich and fertile."

Shadrack, a resident of the Bottom, fought in World War I. He returns a shattered man, unable to accept the complexities of the world. He lives on the outskirts of town, attempting to create order in his life. One of his methods involves compartmentalizing his fear of death in a ritual he invents and names National Suicide Day. The town is at first wary of him and his ritual, then, over time, unthinkingly accepts him.

Meanwhile, the families of the children Nel and Sula are contrasted. Nel is the product of a family that believes deeply in social conventions; hers is a stable home, though some might characterize it as rigid. Nel is uncertain of the conventional life her mother Helene wants for her; these doubts are hammered home when she meets Rochelle, her grandmother who'd worked as a prostitute, the only unconventional woman in her family line. Sula's family is very different: she lives with her grandmother Eva and her mother Hannah both of whom are



seen by the town as eccentric and loose. Their house also serves as a home for three informally adopted boys and a steady stream of boarders.

Despite their differences, Sula and Nel become fiercely attached to each other during adolescence. However, a traumatic accident changes everything. One day, Sula playfully swings a neighborhood boy, Chicken Little, around by his hands. When she loses her grip, the boy falls into a nearby river and drowns. They never tell anyone about the accident even though they did not intend to harm the boy. The two girls begin to grow apart.

One day, while Sula's mother Hannah tries to light a fire outside, her dress catches fire. Eva, Hannah's mother, sees this happening from the upstairs window and jumps out into the garden to try and save her daughter's life. An ambulance comes, but Hannah dies en route to the hospital, and her mother is injured as well. The incident solidifies Eva's concern for her granddaughter Sula, as afterwards she remembers seeing Sula standing on the porch watching her mother burn. Other residents of the Bottom suggest perhaps Sula was stunned by the incident, but Eva believes she stood and watched because she was "interested".

After high school, Nel chooses to marry and settles into the conventional role of wife and mother. Sula follows a wildly divergent path and lives a life of fierce independence and total disregard for social conventions. Shortly after Nel's wedding, Sula leaves the Bottom for a period of 10 years. She has many affairs, some, it is rumored, with white men. However, she finds people following the same boring routines elsewhere, so she returns to the Bottom and to Nel.

Upon her return, the town regards Sula as the very personification of evil for her blatant disregard of social conventions. Their hatred in part rests upon Sula's interracial relationships, but is crystallized when Sula has an affair with Nel's husband, Jude, who subsequently abandons Nel. Ironically, the community's labeling of Sula as evil actually improves their own lives. Her presence in the community gives them the impetus to live harmoniously with one another. Nel breaks off her friendship with Sula. Just before Sula dies in 1940, they achieve a half-hearted reconciliation. With Sula's death, the harmony that had reigned in the town quickly dissolves. Sula died a lonely death, when her body was found, the black community did not care and let the white people take care her funeral. Nel never remarries and the Bottom slowly dissolves after Sula's death, becoming a different place. Nel meets Eva in 1965 in a home for old people, where Eva tells Nel that she knew about her and Sula drowning Chicken Little. After visiting the Peaces' grave, Nel remembers Sula's funeral.



When Nel says goodbye to Sula at her gravestone, she cries out in agony and grief as she recalls years spent with and without her best friend.

Motherhood

Sula is packed with formal moves against social structures. On the surface, Nel and Sula may appear as polar opposites, dissimilar characters with divergent world views, though Morrison's nuanced character portrayals and overall narrative construction resists any attempt at settling into static binary oppositions, including those that might hold varying expressions of motherhood. At the outset, Morrison establishes the complexity of the women we encounter. They are multi-dimensional beings with equally complex familial relationships. The first female characters introduced are four generations of women in Nel's family. Nel's mother Helene, we learn, is born to a "Creole whore", and is subsequently raised by her grandmother, under the perceived protection of religion. These precautions are taken in an effort to save Helene from her mother's "wild blood". As the chapter progresses and Helene and Nel return to New Orleans (a site rich with cultural meaning) where we meet Rochelle, Helene's birth mother, Morrison begins to challenge conventional notions of motherhood while also reinforcing the significance of the extended black family structure. When Rochelle and Helene meet there is no familiar connection between the two no bond to speak of. It is Helene's grandmother, Cecile, who stands in as a mother figure and her primary caretaker. Eva, Sula's grandmother, operates a boarding house and is about the business of her own version of mothering, "directing the lives of her children, friends, strays, and constant stream of boarders" . Expressions of motherhood appear to exist on a spectrum in *Sula*, erring however, on the side of the unconventional. In *Sula*, relationships between mothers and daughters don't seem to be predicated on shared affection and a duty to protect one's offspring. For example, Hannah, Sula's mother is overheard in conversation with her friends, "You love her, like I love Sula. I just don't like her. That's the difference." Hannah's comment does gesture toward a sense of duty, but differs from Jacobs' as it implies an absence of a desire to mother. When Hannah challenges her mother Eva about expressions of love toward her, Eva responds by reminding Hannah of the sacrifices that she has made for her. Love and mothering to Eva is about sacrifice and self-preservation, "...what you talking 'bout did I love you girl I stayed alive for you can't you get that through your thick head or what is that between your ears, heifer?"



Conclusion :

The beauty of Morrison's narrative is its complexity and its ability to illustrate the fluidity and valences of the black female subject as captured in the quotidian. McDowell underscores this point, arguing against regarding black women's lives as homogenous, "they have not developed in a vacuum, but, rather in a complex social framework that includes interaction with black men, white men, and white women, among diverse social groups and subgroups."

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