



STORM TO SERENITY: TONI MORRISON'S SULA

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ABSTRACT

The theme of cultural confrontation is part of every narrative voice in black literature and black writers projected it in myriad reflections emphasizing the aspect of how it is resolved. Morrison is one among them, yet she stands unique in her treatment. She focused her attention not on the white characters forcing direct authority, but on the black characters' troubled psyche and its effect on their behavior within the context of oppression. Even though there are no white characters in Sula, Morrison made Sula adopt the vagaries of white life and she comes back to Bottom like a typhoon. Her arrival coincides with the death of robins and her presence creates a whirlpool of problems to serene Nel and her family. Experimenting with life Sula creates storm in the community but in her death Sula transcends and establishes continuity between past and present, temporal and eternal, natural and supernatural.

KEYWORDS : unconventional, serenity, transcend

Toni Morrison's creative rigor, her intellectual and critical depth and her prophetic vision of the role of literature in interpreting the African American experience in the United States are unsurpassed. With her androgynous literary voice she narrates the dark truths about black life. The anthropologist in her formatted her creative writings in a progressive sequence depicting the complexity of black life in multicolor. Black people are aggressive, innovative and creative, said Morrison in one of her interviews. Carrying the same legacy she is explorative and sometimes even radical in her characterization and thus, emerged her atypical women characters. They are not just reflecting the plight and protest but standing didactic in one-way to the subjugated in general and black people in particular. The condition in which they live, their suffering, their limitations, their reactions and choices tend to transcend them through a different/unusual alternative.

The theme of cultural confrontation is part of every narrative voice in black literature and black writers projected it in myriad reflections emphasizing the aspect of how it is resolved. Morrison is one among them, yet she stands unique in her treatment. Though the confrontation is between white civilization and black culture, Morrison never made a white man the villain in her works. She simply ignored them like a post-colonial writer from Africa and Asia. She focused her attention not on the white characters forcing direct authority, but on the black characters' troubled psyche and its effect on their behavior within the context of oppression. In her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, we find a scene where a black mother, Pauline, slaps her own black child to pacify a white child. That narration continues in her next novel *Sula*. Even though there are no white characters in *Sula*, Morrison made Sula Peace adopt the vagaries of white life and she comes back to Bottom like a typhoon.

The origin of Bottom as a 'nigger joke' reflecting a white man's deception; Shadack's inauguration of National Suicide Day and Chicken Little's accidental death in the hands of Sula – all together perpetuate the wilderness in Sula and all her actions build the cloud for action. Her arrival coincides with the death of robins and her presence creates a whirlpool of problems to serene Nel Wright and her family. Elizabeth Janeway(1979) aptly says that "Morrison's stunning insight reveals the disrupted emotions produced by living in a world where white standards and goals are presented to blacks as uniquely important and at the same time, impossible for them to achieve."

In Morrison's fiction characters one way or another enacts the historical plight of blacks in American society. In retaliation to white hegemony Sula deserted Bottom and explored the ruthless white cities and returned with a bag full of white tricks and established herself as a wanton sexual seductress. The novel is a multilevel narrative that pivots on the story of Shadack, the war veteran. The chaotic savage war

leaves him schizophrenic and insane. Back to Medallion he tries to impose an unnatural order on death and inaugurates an annual ritual of National Suicide Day.

The ex-soldier's outward disorderliness which negates the orderliness of his house reflects his inner struggle and absurdity of existence, which he tries to bring to a state of serenity. Shadrack as a sole witness to Chicken Little's accidental death identifies Sula with similar problem and assures permanence by saying 'always' to her unanswered question. However, years later when Sula dies Shadrack realizes that his efforts to contain death and disorder have been fruitless.

Sula and Nel are drawn to each other at the age of puberty with an awareness that 'they are neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph is forbidden to them(Morrison, 1973).' As Morrison(1973) describes 'they were solitary little girls whose loneliness was so profound it intoxicated them and sent them into Technicolored visions' - Nel of some fiery prince and Sula of someone coming on a gray-and-white horse. They are fortunate to meet each other and the friendship between them initiates Sula to self-mutilate for the sake of Nel. The same love makes even Nel to pardon Sula who virtually bewitches Nel's husband in the later part of the story. In contrast to the concept that women cannot keep secrets, these two friends protect the secret and remain as silent spectators of their actions. They see a deliverance in their lives, as their friendship fulfills the missing things in life. Speaking to Claudia Tate, Morrison says that "aggression is not as new to black women as it is to white women. Black women seem able to combine the nest and the adventure. They are both safe harbor and ship (Taylor-Guthrie 1994)." This is evidently seen in Nel and Sula.

Nel follows a culturally defined path and becomes a wife, mother, good woman of church, much like her mother Helene, who is an impressive woman in Medallion as wife of a seaman. Helene is a pretty daughter of a Creole whore in New Orleans. She is protected from the shadows of red shutters by her grandmother who counsels her 'to be constantly on guard for any sign of her mother's wild blood (Morrison 1973).' Acting from this fear Helene stifles the assertive development of her daughter's self. Under her orderliness Nel becomes obedient, polite and conventional. But while returning from her grandmother's funeral, Nel witnesses her mother cringing before a white railway conductor, under the disgusted, scorn filled impotent eyes of a group of black soldiers. Haunted by this experience she becomes restless and sleepless and suddenly discovers her 'self,'- "I'm me, I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me(Morrison 1973)." Unable to sustain this self definition alone, she needs a friend to complement her and that friend is none other than much less conventional Sula.

Unlike Nel, Sula is an adventuress who follows unconventional path towards self-assertion. Sula's female heritage is an unbroken line of 'man loving' women who exist as sexually desiring subjects rather than as objects of male desire. Her widowed mother Hannah, has a line of men, exasperating the 'good' women in the community who calls her 'nasty'. Sula is 'wedged into a household of throbbing disorder constantly awry (Morrison 1973), and lives under the sovereignty of her grandmother Eva Peace, in a ramshackle house. Eva Peace acts against the norms of the community and her freedom gives her the ability to love, hate, create, conquer and kill with responsibility and accountability only to herself. She could sacrifice her leg to save her children and also could put her son Plum to flames when he returns from the war as a drug addict. Sula being Eva's granddaughter adopts Eva's powerful stratagem. Speaking to Betty Jean Parker, Morrison expresses that :

"In Sula I tried to posit a situation where there was a so-called good and a so-called evil people. Nel and Sula are symbolic of this condition. And of course, you can't always tell which is which. ... They complement each other. They support each other. I suppose the two of them together could have made a wonderful single human being. But, you see, they are like a Janus' head (Taylor-Guthrie 1994)."

On the surface it appears that society-conscious Nel contrasts with Sula, the vivid rebel but in actuality they resemble each other. Their complementary relationship embodies the vitality of the black past and successful pilgrimage to the origins.

At the age of puberty she experience two things that forged her radical self. First is that Sula overhears her mother saying that she doesn't like her. Bewildered, Sula feels rejected but Nel's call brings her back from the black thoughts to the bright day light. The second experience is on the river bank which Morrison symbolically reveals the culmination of girls' friendship set in deep communion with nature. They ritually dig a hole and covers it up again which confirms their unity, their sexuality and their joint responsibility for what is about to happen. This bond is solidified when Sula accidentally drops Chicken Little into the river while swinging him around. Sula's inability to mourn Chicken Little's death, makes her what she is "as willing to feel pain as to give pain ... she had no center, no speck around (Morrison 1973)." With nothing to depend on, not even her 'self', Sula patterns unconventional life style.

Sula transcends the traditional and patriarchal enforcement by setting herself on journey of the 'self'. She is adamant at unchaining herself from the clutches that imprison her. She has the resilience, will power and strength to stand at odds with the community. She defines her identity and refutes any such view that leaves a woman nothing but a burden which she is forced to bear. As Morrison puts it 'hers was an experimental life'. Sula remains an unyielding personality of a pariah, who refuses to succumb to the codes, values and standards of both the dominant culture and her immediate environment.

Unlike Sula, Nel stands as a reflection of black woman's strength to overcome hurdles and sustain composure in a life of disharmony. By being a good catholic she wanted to confront the white culture. But neither of the friends is completely successful. Their 'Technicolor' dream of 'someone' is shattered. Sula returns to Medallion while robins are dying. She confronts with Eva and puts her in an old age home. The community considers her a visitation of evil. Yet her effect on them is good. Morrison says that 'Black people in general don't annihilate evil. We believe that evil has a natural place in the universe. We may, in fact, live right next door to it, not only in the form of something metaphysical, but also in terms of people (Taylor-Guthrie 1994)." Sula sleeps with Nel's husband Jude and loses Nel. Only Ajax, a man as strong and as free as herself, makes her desire to join the other self to return from her Cain-like exile, as she prefers to take responsibility for another person. Facing his loss, Sula becomes like the headless soldier that Shadrack sees in war. The image of paper dolls also suggests emptiness of mind and soul. Finally that emptiness starves Sula to death. She dies as she believes that she has "sung all the songs there are (Morrison 1973)."

The community refuses to mourn and leaves Sula's dead body to the white people, denying her essence and dishonoring her. It results in the destruction of the community at the end of the novel. But in her death Sula recognizes that she needs community and especially Nel. This need for the 'other' is confirmed after the death. Sula lives on, as Nel feels the presence of her dead friend. Nel realizes that she never missed her husband Jude but that she does miss Sula. "We was girls together ... O Lord, Sula ... girl, girl, girlgirlgirl (Morrison 1973)." That girl is Nel, who is shocked to see into herself with Eva's assertion that Nel too is guilty and that Nel and Sula are alike. Nel realizes that there is no difference between them. This self-knowledge frees her from hating Sula and to love her again. Ultimately she finds expression for her grief-filled love.

Rememorising and mourning her friend Nel finds her own eye twitching as she takes on the birth mark on the eye of Sula and is reborn. As Morrison says Nel and Sula make up one whole person. Experimenting with life Sula creates storm in the community but in her death Sula transcends and establishes continuity between past and present, temporal and eternal, natural and supernatural. The refrain "shall we gather at the River?(Morrison 1973)" refers to the river in which Chicken Little drowned and also the Eden of the two girls' early unbroken relationship. Sula has escaped the fallen modern world, returns to the past and is now whole. Nel's cry "a fine cry – loud and long – with circles of sorrow (Morrison 1973)" is suggestive of self knowledge and serenity attainable only through an affirmation of the black past in all of its fullness. Thus, after her death Sula continues to live in Nel, as an embodiment of serenity, a complete self.

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