

Condemnation of Patriarchal Preeminence in *Sula*

Bishnu Prasad Pokharel, Ph.D

Associate Professor, Tribhuvan University

Department of English, Saraswati Multiple Campus, Kathmanu, Nepal.

ABSTRACT

Published in 1973, the black writer Toni Morrison's novel *Sula* narrates a journey of the main protagonist Sula, who after learning that male chauvinist forces have perennially stunted her spontaneous growth, decides to protest and rebel against those very forces. This article analyzes the novel from feminist lens to explore how far the main protagonist Sula denies hierarchical order of male superiority. The paper provides critical remarks about Sula, then employs feminism as a theoretical tool, and applies the same theory to analyze the text to present Sula's resistance.

Key words: Denial, hierarchy, Sula, feminism, male chauvinism

INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison's novel *Sula*, published in 1973, is an exquisitely rendered story about two women friends, Nel Wright and Sula Peace. From quite early on, they estranged in young adulthood and later reunited as grown up women. Nel grows up to become a wife and a mother, happy to remain ensconced in her hometown of Medallion, Ohio. Sula Peace, on the other hand, leaves Medallion to experience something different: college, men, and a life in the big city, an exceptional choice for a black woman to make. The novel deals with how Sula breaks away from the pale of patriarchy to live a life of personal choice and freedom. Linden Peach (1998, p.3) points out, "These stories must have been at least partly responsible for the blurring of the boundaries between fantasy and reality and between fact and fiction in Morrison's novels which some critics have taken, despite, Morrison's own objection to the label, for magic realism". The profundity of the novel rests on the way Sula rebels the existing male-dominated social structure.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Nel and Sula in the novel *Sula* represent as complementary opposites. The novel revolves around the theme of the friendship between them. A critical juncture in the novel arises when their companionship begins to flounder; precisely this is the point when the meaning of friendship takes on a new lease of life. Although Nel and Sula each is a half of the figurative whole self, Nel defines her by community conventions while Sula resolves to stand as an iconoclast. While the former chooses to accept the status quo, the latter decides to discard the established norms and values.

Bold and distinctive, Sula illustrates a character who is markedly different from other female characters. Hertense J. Spillers (1993, p.210) writes about her, "The most important irruption of black women's writing in our era". Morrison portrayed Sula as an outcast or a disgrace right from the beginning of the novel. Her status as a woman without a man and a woman without children is simply incomprehensible or shocking to the community, she belongs to the Bottom Community. In

fact, the community feels affronted by her lifestyle. Her grandmother Eva asks her to have babies and accepts community's way of life. In response, Sula (, 1987, p. 92). asserts, "I do not want to make somebody else. I want to make myself". Because of her assertive stance, Sula's people in the Bottom Community categorize her as a pariah and therefore a dangerous member. In no way can the unconsciousness of the community come to terms with her activities. Barbara Christian (1993, p.88) reflects on Sula's incongruent behavior: "Sula is an outsider because she is distinctly different because she is consciously seeking to make herself rather than others, and she is totally unconcerned about what others think; in other words, she does not care". She raises strict voice to the Black Aesthetic ideology. Madhu Dubey (1998, p.76) states, "Sula embodies a specifically feminine newness that cannot be easily assimilated into Black Aesthetic ideology". These critics also etch out the aggressive temperament that Sula constitutes.

Critics' evaluations of *Sula* have hardly transcended such issues as racial discrimination, sisterhood, pathos, and character study. Taking a cue from these studies, this article attempts to reveal a largely unexplored domain of the novel- a subtle and nuanced representation of individual choice, identity, and an urge to live of one's own accord. Indeed, the novel is about a woman who starkly refuses to submit to the gender- based existing social, cultural and conventional order, battling her way to establish her identity not as a woman but as a human being. Thus, the researcher inferred that Morrison's novel *Sula* is a denunciation of white male power and male-centered Afro-American literary tradition. Therefore, the present study focuses on how Sula defies the leech-like power of male authority and mocks at it.

HYPOTHESIS

Sula's confrontation with her own oppressive community, her unrelenting defiance and resistance, and refusal to accept the traditionally imposed role ultimately pave the way for her long-desired individual emancipation.

Feminism

Feminist writers centre on the advocacy of women's right and their liberation from the male-centered social arrangement. They questioned about the way community defined women in relation to their men counterparts. The bottom line of feminist's argument is that male-centered society made females to endure discrimination on a wide range of areas: political, economic, cultural and spiritual. They challenge the notion that women are inferior to men. The general community programmed women to accept their condition as natural, as something transcendental. Moreover, the social order perpetually reminded of their subordination through stereotypes. Feminism calls into question this very notion. Hence, feminism is an interventionist project that strikes at the nerve of male chauvinistic outlook.

The main goal of the feminists is to obliterate the discrimination and oppression of females based on sex, age, class, religion and race. M. A.R. Habib (2008, p. 667) contends, "Indeed, a depiction of women in literature- as angles, goddess, whores, obedient wives, and mother figures- was an integral means of perpetuating these ideologies of gender. Pope(2002, p.115) argues that the idea of female is a social construct and maintains that "Gender, however, refers to our social make-up and those culturally constructed differences which distinguish us as feminine or masculine: differences of dress, social role, expectations, etc". Feminists critique the typical gender-based views of the society.

In 1973, when black feminism came into existence with the foundation of 'National Black Feminist Organization', its agenda were clear and unambiguously pronounced: a struggle against racial, sexual, heterosexual and class oppression. It also published a manifesto on Black feminist. Black women writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Code Barbara, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison encouraged the people showing the female characters revolutionary. Their characters are not submissive, neither are they meek and weak; they are defiant and strong.

Condemnation of Patriarchal Preeminence in *Sula*

Toni Morrison's novel *Sula* begins with a graphic description of the landscape beside the Ohio River of the United States. Having recently moved to a high hill, very dry and unfertile place, a group of black migrants made this place their abode and named it the Bottom. Beside the Ohio River lies a long stretch of fertile valley known as the Medallion where the White people live. To the white, it is strange and confounding why the Black named their hill the Bottom. In fact, the hill where the Black resides towers above all the surrounding terrains. Actually, the black people named the top hill as the Bottom measuring from spiritual perspective. It is beyond the comprehension of the white people why they call the up hill Bottom, and they quip the baptism as "A joke, A nigger joke" (*Sula* 4).

Nel and Sula, two girls from the Bottom community, develop a deep intimacy from their childhood. Nel and Sula initially find "in each other's eyes the intimacy, they were looking for" (52). Nel thinks that "their friendship was so close, they themselves had difficulty distinguishing one's thoughts from the others" (83). In Sula's perspective, Nel fills the space of Sula and becomes her equation. Nel is "the closest thing to both another and a self". Sula and Nel virtually create each other's self as one sees the other through the other girl's eye, thus complementing what the other lacks. Nel and Sula's friendship is embellished romantically like a heterosexual encounter. Their activity symbolically stands for the heterosexual activity between male and female. As their friendship is about to deepen, they begin to realize that the relationship is going to endanger the traditions and norms that their Bottom Community has held so dearly. They are different from the perception of the Black Aesthetics.

From her early age, Sula acts in accordance with her own temperament and whims. She breaks away from the rules and limitations that tend to strangulate her free will and identity. She leads an experimental life in her own way in order to please herself. She was a person who "was distinctly different..." and "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" (118). This is her point of departure from convention.

Pursuing her identity, Sula gets into a trouble: she is unwittingly embroiled in an otherwise cohesive relationship with her community folk. Her experiments with life hurl her headlong into a direct painful conflict with her own people. Her desire collides badly with the accepted and established societal norms, beliefs, behaviors and culture. Consequently, she finds herself in a state of recurrent war with everything, everybody around her. She adamantly rejects the woman as a children-bearing machine. Her grandmother, Eva's suggestion to her "to get married" and "have some babies" because "[i]t'll settle you" (92) hardly weakens her determination of living a blissfully carefree life. She gives an exceptional answer as a woman and strongly lambasts the idea of settlement and matrimonial coziness.

Sula, as a strong protagonist, serves as a veritable foil to the old image of a woman. By unfettering the shackles of community chains, she creates a rupture with the traditional pattern of life. She even offers to rescue her friend Nel from the drudgery of marriage; she comments upon Nel's marriage with Jude and her bearing three children to him. She asks frankly to contact her if Nel wants to make a drastic change in her lifestyle, "Well, if you change your mind call me" (96). Sula's radical outlook as a woman goes a long way in tearing apart the entrenched stereotypical pattern of society.

Sula explores a completely new, radical, and shocking image of black characters. Jago et al (2011, p.59) say about the main character, "protagonist is typically a round character, one who exhibits a range of emotions and changes over the course of the story". The protagonist rebuffs the way white characters negate the image of a black man. Sula is the embodiment of a valiant protagonist. Because of her aberrant behavior, the general public name her "a witch by the people of Bottom ...watched her far more closely than they watched any other roach or bitch in the town" (113). Although the community characterizes her as witch, she never ceases to question the cultural machinery of community. She remains undeterred on her march towards freedom and individuality.

Sula's unusual behavior of disobeying the established rules and regulations renders her an outsider. The inhabitants of Bottom ostracize Sula due to her incongruent attributes. Even if she faces eviction from the citizens of Bottom, she does not compromise with the traditional systems and fuels her effort to establish a free society, which will be devoid of pride and prejudice. She has a strong conviction that her liberal outlook to sex, critical outlook to marriage and childbirth, pragmatic thoughts about society paves the way to individual freedom. Because of Sula's woman-favored attitude, Nel slowly begins to understand her and elevates her to the stature of "Lord Sula" (174). This is the crucial moment of triumph for Sula. Her romance and promiscuous behavior, which is against black aesthetic and black tradition, represents her as a rebellious woman. Her unrestrained sexual relations bespeak her defiance. Sula approaches the issue of sex as common phenomena of human life and she is not at all hesitating in being involved in sexual affairs. She goes to bed with men as frequently as she could, violating every etiquette, "Sula involves in the sexual vulnerability without hesitation" (129).

Sula, after returning from town gaining a broader education, profusely indulges her pleasure without considering others' concern. She gains all the spirit so that she could violate the decorum of the tradition. Because of her outspoken attitude about sex, society condemns her as despicable. The people decried as a 'pariah', "Sula was a pariah, then and knew it. Knew that they despised her and believed that they framed their hatred as disgust for the easy way she lay with men" (122). She is ready to accept her as an outsider because the appellation serves as a tool to challenge the society.

Sula's unchecked involvement in the sexual affairs smears a disgrace on the face of patriarchal organism of the Bottom community. The social order paints the situation thus: "love making seemed to her at first creation of special kind of joy. She thought she likes the sootiness of sex and its comedy ...sexual aesthetics bored her" (122). Sula, in her journey of dismantling the established discourse, even makes sexual affair with her best friend's husband Jude. Unremorseful, she takes it as common act as if nothing has happened. When Nel inquires about it, "...you did not love enough to leave him alone. To let him love me. You had to take him away" (145), Sula responds very lightly "What do you mean take him away? I did not kill him. I just fucked him. If we were good friends, how come you could not get over it" (145).

Sula becomes a sex worker not because she enjoys being so. As a sex worker, she explores her inner self that makes her feel that she can challenge the tradition. Sex becomes an instrument to explore her own being as she always tries to do something that lends novelty to her life. This way, she presents herself as an epitome of a radical feminist.

Although Sula is involved in sexual affairs with her best friend, Nel's husband Jude, she has no misgivings about what she did. She educates the perturbed Nel to view every old thing through new eyes, new vision. Sula fondly recollects the idyllic relationship that their childhood enjoyed, which was the life of constant sharing. She is sharply distracted from earlier representation of black female characters in literature. She is indifferent to all the things around her and relinquishes the way people live. The desire for a new identity and change in conventional notions leads her to disregard her ancestors, who remain dumb observer when her mother burns up herself.

Sula's anathema to her community emanates from the monotonous similitude that the people are condemned to follow. She comments that people are blindly pursuing the same predictable and mundane patterns of life like working same months, sweating same sweat, learning same love tricks, and leading the same household life. For her, this type of life lacks personal expression; the life that is cursed with chronic repetitiveness. As shown in following spontaneous expression, she wishes the life of self and wants others to become as intimate with her own selves:

All those cites held the same people; working the same months, sweating the same water: The new who took her one or another of those places had merged into one large personality: the same languages of love, the same entertainments of love, the same cooling of love. Whenever she introduced her private thoughts into their rubbings or goings, the hooded their eyes.(120)

Sula questions the existence of god and tradition. On this score, the following dialogue between Eva and Sula represents her stance;

*"Bible say honor thy father and thy mother that thy days may be long upon the land they God giveth thee."
"Mamma must have skipped that part. Her days was not too long".
"Pus mouth! God's going to strike you!"
"Which God? The one watched you Plum"(93)*

This extract sums up her as a female with a new vision armed with a passion to free the fettered minds from the oppressive tentacles of the past. For her, the past prevents females from progressing and projecting a new vision. Sula does not accept the old image of black as victims and strives to carve out a niche for herself in an extremely repressive social condition. Therefore, rejecting the existing situation she seeks for change, dynamism and newness. She is bored by the same banal and anonymous phenomena and feels doomed to endure the dullness that surrounds her from all around. She struggles to come to terms with a world that lacks any profound meaning and novelty: "That's the same sun I looked at when I was twelve, the same pear trees. If I live a hundred years my urine will flow the same way, my armpits and breath will smell the same. My hair will grow from the same holes. I did not mean anything. I never mean anything" (147). Sula is dismayed, and sympathizes with a hopelessly impossible case, Nel. She disregards the recurring

resemblance of life. She rejects the identicalness of life and says, “There are not anymore new songs and I have sung them all” (137). This is the sign for newness.

For the residents of the Bottom, Sula is an absolute nuisance. Since she is a threat to the community cohesion, her own compatriots banish her. For her experimental life and discourteous behavior, people call her as outsider and evil. Other than, the reason that the town hates her, the next question to resolve is why Sula is set apart; and the answer seems to lie in Morrison’s feminist beliefs and in her rejection of patriarchal values. In effect, Sula is an independent female with an inexhaustible imagination, McDowell (1984, p. 84) presents “the narrative suggests that one can not belong to the community and preserve the imagination, for the orthodox vocations for women—marriage and motherhood—restrict if not preclude imaginative expression”. Her heretical activities represent her struggle to get rid of the repressive condition that she was born.

Even though people of her community brand by her own people, she provides a positive energy to the members of her community to test their values. Her actions indirectly force other people to be more caring and loving to their belongings. However, Sula adopts her own values and definition of free self by disobeying traditional hierarchy and winning the heart of the people. She struggles to get rid of social and religious bondage and in doing so; she earns personal freedom, comes out with flying colors and gains confidence in her life. Thus, through her unceasing defiance and resistance, she translates her life into creative zeal to establish herself as a free entity.

CONCLUSION

Toni Morrison depicted Sula as a woman who unflinchingly wrests her true ‘self’ from the socially programmed ‘other’. Although her journey to a life of personal choice was not complete without a fight (she has to suffer social sanctions), she is at last a completely transformed woman, an assertive human being who is now prepared to deny male-dominated social system. The transgression that Sula commits against her own community ironically turns out to be a liberating act for her. Sula confronts her community squarely, faces social eviction, wins over the people and lastly gains her identity. She flouts the long-cherished and time-honored normative prescriptions of the black community in which she was born and brought up. It seems that the name “The Bottom” is the metonymic signifier for Sula’s black community, which although reside atop the hill and therefore should have been liberating and accommodating is unfortunately constricting and parochial. The writer subtly blends the geographical landscape of the hill with the landscape of the black community by creating a top-bottom dichotomy. Cleft between the two, Sula chooses to abandon the bottom aspect of her community and sets out on a course that will ultimately make her independent and happy.

References

- Christian, B. (1993). “The Contemporary Fables of Toni Morrison” *Toni Morrison: Critical perspective past and present*. Ed. Hrnry Louis Gates, Jr. and K.A. Appiah. New York: Armistad Press.
- Dubey, M. (1998). “No Bottom and No Top”. *Oppositions in Sula*. Ed. Lindean Peach. New York: St. Martin’s Press..
- Habib, M.A.R. (2008). *A history of literary criticism and theory*. Oxford; Blackwell Publishing..
- Jago, C., Shea, R.H., Scanion, L, and Aufses, R.D. (2011). *Literatur and composition: Reading, writing and thinking*. First Ed. Boston and New York: Bedford/ St. Martin’s.

Pokharel, B. P. (2020). Condemnation of Patriarchal Preeminence in *Sula*. *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal*, 7(4) 122-128.

McDowell, D.(1984). "The Self and the Other : Reading Toni Morrison's *Sula* and the Black Female". *Critical essays on Toni Morrison*. Ed. Nellie McKay. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Morrison, T. (1987). *Sula*. New York: Plume.

Peach, L. (1998). *New casebooks*. New York: Martin's Press.

Pope, R(2002). *The English studies book*. 2nd Ed. London and New York: Routledge.

Spillers, H. J.(1993). " A Hateful Passion, a Last Love." *Toni Morrison: Critical perspective past and present*. Eds. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and J.R.and K.A. Appiah. New York: Arimstad Press