

SULA: A STUDY IN BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS

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**Abstract:**

Toni Morrison's novel, *Sula* studies the ways in which black people struggle to live in America, a country with a disreputable history of oppressing black people. As African- American place in American society has changed over centuries, the focus of African- American literature has also changed. The genre of slave narratives comprises accounts of slaves under slavery, the path of justice and recovery to freedom. African- American literature can be defined as the writings by people of African descent living in the United States. The literature generally focused on the role of African Americans in the larger American society. The writings often highlight the current struggle of the African American race. *Sula* is a novel in the tradition of African- American literature, exploring the legacy of the African diaspora through the images of loss and memory. Black characters in the novel face the heaviness of the past in which White Americans have constantly cheating blacks out of their property and their rights by manipulating laws, social norms and even language. The novel has been set in the city of Medallion, the people have been narrowed to the Bottom, a least desirable neighborhood of the city. Morrison writes for black women with a hope that they may re-own, re-name their cultural bonds. *Sula* records the priorities of race and male-centered Afro-American narrative and literary criticism.

Keywords: Slavery, black women, cultural bond, race, oppression.

About the Author:

On February 18, 1931, Toni Morrison was born in the mill town of Lorain, Ohio. Her father, George, was a shipyard welder from Georgia and her mother, Ramah Willis Wofford. She is an American novelist, editor and Professor Emeritus at Princeton University. Although her novels typically concentrate on black women, Morrison does not identify her works as a feminist. Her novel, *Sula* which was published in 1973 was nominated for the National Book Award in 1975. Morrison exposes her novels with the fusion of vision and technique. Writing out both the black and black women's traditions, her novels are a rejection of white patriarchal modernism and are the radical reconsiderations of the race and male-centered Afro-American literary tradition.

An Overview:

Toni Morrison's *Sula* is a novel set in the little town of Medallion, Ohio between 1919 and 1965. The story revolves around the lives of two black women, Nel Wright and Sula Peace. They became girlhood friends while living in the black community. Nel was the daughter of Wiley and Helene Wright. Nel is a spiritless little girl until she makes the trip to New Orleans for the funeral. When she returns, she realizes her sense of identity and makes her first friend, Sula. They both meet at the age of twelve, both 'wishbone thin and easy assed', both only children, both friendless for children except for each other. Sula leaves town in search of her experimental life. Nel marries Jude and settles into her personal life. Ten years later (1937), Sula returns back to the town and steals Nel's husband. Everyone in the town started hating her. When Sula dies, Nel understands that their friendship transcends everything.

The central conflict:

One of the most noteworthy developments in the Afro-American custom has been the creation of a class of intellectuals like scholars, critics and also writers. The conflict is between the African American and American culture and the class of intellectuals. The conflict is both productive and traumatic force. The centralities of conflict in the works of afro American writers are double consciousness, dialogic of difference, oppression, anchorage, and voyage. Morrison is preoccupied with the technical considerations of the point of view and the question of representation itself. The novel is a figure of music. When Morrison tries to describe Sula's blackness and femaleness, Sula becomes the figure of language itself.

The black community in the novel:

Black characters in the novel face the heaviness of tortures by the whites. The novel has been set in a city of Medallion, where the African-Americans limit themselves in an area named *Bottom*, the least neighborhood of the society with the highest attitude. Many of the blacks, who live in the bottom, regard the culture of the whites with hatred. But the way in which

white culture shaped the society, black people in the novel has no other existing standard for beauty and cleverness other the whiteness. Many of the black characters at the bottom are desperate to join the white community.

The role of race and racism in the novel is crucial to understand. Even though all the characters in the novel are black, they are trained to think themselves as the second-class citizens. They hate each other for being black. By writing *Sula*, a book about the African-American experience in the 20th century, Morrison studies how a group struggles for enhancement in a society that's been constructed to make this improvement impossible.

Black consciousness:

The white people use linguistic tricks to force the uneducated black people into an inferior position. The novels open up with the black community, Bottom and the story behind the name. The white owners would promise the slaves "bottom land", that the slaves assumed to be good and fertile land in the valley. Later, the slave masters would give their former slaves the useless land high, up in the hills, telling them it's the "bottom of heaven"

"Oh, no! See those hills? That's bottomland rich and fertile. That's why we call it so." (5)

Shadrack, a black veteran of World War One, sees his own face in a toilet bowl, his grave blackface. He's been deeply disturbed by what he witnessed in the war. He also finds comfort and stability in his blackness. Shadrack sees that there is nothing inferior about blackness. It is the color of calm, beauty and power. He is in a condition to accept him, the cruelty of war and of U.S. racism. The character behavior of self-acceptance mirrors that the people will accept an inferior position in the society out of fear, exhaustion, and weakness.

Helene Wright along with her troublesome daughter, Nel Wright decides to move to Helene's hometown in Louisiana, to attend her grandmother's funeral. She was approached by a white man on the train who bellies her and faces a strong contempt of the black men on the train. Even as a young girl, Nel feels pity for her mother and swears to herself that she will never allow any men to feel her the same way, helpless and submissive. The promise that she makes to herself indirectly signifies that in future, one become conscious of sex and sexual politics.

Sula acquires a reputation for being a bitch, untrustworthy and devious women over years. She sends her grandmother, Eva Peace, into a nursing home despite she has been a caretaker to hundreds of children. She also had an illicit relationship with Jude, Nel's husband. The town people were more interested in attacking women's reputations – they condemn only *Sula* for her relationship with Jude and exactly not him for cheating his wife and Hannah for being "easy", criticize *Sula* for watching her death.

Later in the novel, Nel visits *Sula*, who is slowly dying but she justifies all her actions like her relationship with Jude, traveling across the country, putting Eva in a home and so on. She adds that she has spent her adult life trying to fully "live in this world". In order to escape the fate of many black women, *Sula* has always aimed to be strong and independent. By

choosing to travel the country she will be independent of her sexuality. She is of the view that personal freedom and personal experience are the only things worth living for.

“But my lonely is mine. Now your lonely is somebody else’s. Made by somebody else and handed to you. Ain’t that something? A secondhand lonely”

The novel examines the terms ‘good’ and ‘evil’ that often resembles one another. It addresses the confusing mysteries of human emotions and relationships, ultimately concluding that social conventions are inadequate.

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