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Identity, Freedom, and Alienation in Toni Morrison's *Sula*: An Existential Reading

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Abstract
The present study aims to investigate the complex relationship between racism, sexism, and the development of personal identities, especially as it relates to the lived experiences of black women in Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973). According to Morrison, racism plays two roles: it shapes black identity and makes it more difficult for black women to find their own identities. The story highlights the importance of self-actualization and human agency as essential elements of the identity development process. This implies that the main concerns of the book go beyond the larger framework of racial and social oppression to include the personal journeys that each character takes in an effort to claim their unique identities. It explores the protagonists' quest for self-actualization, purpose, and authenticity while engaging with existential philosophies.

Keywords: Race, Gender, Discrimination, Jeopardy, Black, Identity, Violence

Sula by Toni Morrison explores the quest for identity in an African American society influenced by social expectations, gender, ethnicity, and memory. Sula Peace and Nel Wright are two opposing but closely related characters in the book whose lives highlight the conflict between social conformity and individual freedom. Sula defies the moral norms of the Bottom society, whereas Nel embraces the traditional duties of daughter, wife, mother, and respectable lady. Morrison employs this distinction to study identity as something that is generated by choice, struggle, desire, and social judgement rather than something that is fixed or inherited. The existential topic of the book revolves around Sula's character. She makes the decision to live a life that defies social norms regarding parenthood, marriage, and the house. The Bottom perceives her as dangerous due to her lack of children, sexual independence, and rejection of social

acceptance. However, Morrison does not only portray Sula as immoral. Instead, she turns into a character who the book uses to question who has the right to define morality. Sula's existence demonstrates the existential notion that each person must find meaning by their own decisions, even if those decisions result in social rejection, loneliness, and misunderstanding. Her liberty owes itself to a double price through risk and loneliness. Nel, in contrast, embodies approval and socially acceptable behavior. This is the path her family and community expect of her, yet Morrison subtly highlights the pitfalls of such acquiescence. Sula greatly bolsters Nel's identity while Nel has a strong influence through social acceptance of Sula. When Sula, who has always served such an important role in Nel's life, sleeps with Jude–the man who is her partner as well as the other half of her professional codependent duo; an act that the betrayal tears apart–Nel's identity collapses. This is a marital and existential crisis that forces her to reckon with the emptiness beneath the benevolent identity she has chosen. Morrison thus illustrates how adherence can breed alienation as well. In this respect, black feminist criticism is illuminating (Barbara Smith, You Can't Sing a Song without a Tune), which means that literature by black women should not be separated from the relationship between race–gender, and female identity. Smith argues that black feminist criticism has a "primary commitment to exploring how both sexual and racial politics and female identity are inextricable elements in Black women's writing" (137). Morrison's own foreword to *Sula* also supports this reading of female freedom. Reflecting on the novel's central questions, she asks: "What choices are available to black women outside of their own society's approval?" (Morrison, Foreword xiii). Morrison's fictional response to this issue can be interpreted as Sula's rejection of marriage, motherhood, and respectability: the options are genuine, but they come at the expense of isolation.

The novel's existential worldview is further enhanced by its obsession with death. Shadrack's National Suicide Day is an attempt to bring order to the fear of death following the trauma of war, not just insanity or nihilism. Shadrack attempts to make mortality bearable by designating a specific day for death. One of the main issues of the book is shown by his ritual: while living in constant fear of death, people nevertheless look for ways to find purpose, control, and a sense of belonging. In this sense, death functions in Sula as both a conclusion and a force that draws attention to the vulnerability of human identity. Morrison's narrative framework provides additional support for this analysis of identity. The book does not present life in a clear-cut, sequential manner. Instead, memory, history, and personal experience overlap. Identity is dynamic, multifaceted, and historically conditioned rather than static, as seen by the way the past continuously shapes the present. The Bottom itself becomes a social space that watches, assesses, remembers, and provides context for people's lives. The moral contrast between Sula and Nel is one of the book's most powerful achievements. Morrison influences how the Bottom group views Sula as evil and Nel as good.

Sula's purported evil gives the group a shared object of criticism, whereas Nel's goodness is demonstrated to be dependent on convention rather than self-awareness. Nel's appeal for Sula at the end of the novel suggests that the friend who was an integral part of her identity; rather than Jude, is what she has lost the most. Morrison therefore transforms the story of female friendship into a more thorough meditation on selfhood, freedom, morality, and loss. As a result, Sula uses the experiences of women who must strike a balance between their own needs and those of society to examine existential questions. Morrison does not offer a simple celebration of freedom or conformity. Instead, she exposes the price of both. Sula's radical independence gives

rise to loneliness, while Nel's philotimo generates emotional incompleteness. Through this interlinked existence, the tale asks questions of identity construction and what makes moral selves under rules that limit free will. In refusing to do what Bottom women are expected to do, Sula is isolated. Rejection of marriage, children and conventional respectability makes her seem risky, but also imbues her with a fierce sense of self-definition. One of the things that sets up Nel's unique views on estrangement. She adheres to social norms, but following Jude's treachery and Sula's murder, she realises how weak the identity she has accepted is. Her last plea for Sula shows that her greatest loss is not just her husband but also the friend who helped to define who she is. As a result, Morrison portrays identity as relational, erratic, and constantly rebuilt by memory, decision, loss, and social rejection. Nel and Sula not only contrast greatly from one another but also symbolise two unfulfilled lifestyles: Nel's conformity results in emotional emptiness, while Sula's radical freedom leads to loneliness. By mapping the conjoined fates of two women, Morrison questions whether one can ever be an authentic self in a culture that sees woman as her worth measured by chastity, compliance, and honor. Toni Morrison's Sula is a powerful reflection on notions of morality, isolation, self-sufficiency and identity. The book interrogates how our fixed notions of good and evil, individuality and conformity, social loyalty, and personal autonomy can be set aside.

The fact that neither Sula nor Nel attain total independence is the source of its existential strength. Morrison demonstrates how tough decisions shape a person's identity, yet these decisions are always influenced by grief, gender, memory, and community. Sula thus transforms from a tale of female camaraderie into a profound reflection on the human endeavour to define oneself in a world of limitations, struggle, and longing. Sula rejects the idea that one's identity is defined by marriage, motherhood, family, or social approval. Her declaration, "I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself" (Morrison 85), becomes central to her character. It demonstrates her wish to forge her own identity instead of adhering to social norms. The strange world of the Peace home has a direct bearing on Sula's development. Instead of being subject to patriarchal control, Sula, Hannah, and Eva Peace reside in a household run by women. Although Eva is the strong matriarch of the household, Hannah challenges traditional domestic decorum to provide Sula with an alternative model of womanhood. Sula learns from Hannah's perspective on sexuality that desire need not be connected to social acceptance, marriage, or acquisition. Sula's upbringing in this setting teaches her to be wary of rigid norms and to see womanhood as something that can be fashioned by one's own desires.

Morrison uses the contrast between Sula and Nel Wright to further develop this topic. Nel's early assertion, "'I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me'" (Morrison 32), reveals her first experience of individual selfhood. Yet Nel gradually submits to the expectations of marriage, respectability, and communal approval. Sula, by contrast, remains committed to experiment, freedom, and self-definition. Their friendship allows both girls to discover forms of freedom denied to them by family and society. Morrison writes that "their friendship was so close" that they had difficulty distinguishing one's thoughts from the other's (Morrison 53). This closeness suggests that Sula and Nel function as two aspects of a divided female self. Morrison herself emphasizes the uniqueness of this female bond. In an interview, she states, "Friendship between women is special, different, and has never been depicted as a major focus of a novel before *Sula*" (qtd. in Smith 138). This claim demonstrates that Sula and Nel's relationship is the emotional and structural core of the book rather than a supporting subplot. Both women find self-

awareness, independence, rivalry, betrayal, and loss in their friendship. Sula is marked apart from the ladies of the Bottom by her refusal to get married, settle down, and start a family. The community's animosity for her is exacerbated by her sexual interactions with married men. However, Morrison does not portray Sula as merely immoral. Rather, she uses Sula to question the moral standards that civilisations employ to oppress women. Sula is hazardous because she refuses to lead a respectable, useful, or subservient existence. Her freedom draws attention to the limitations of a society that only allows women to express who they are through marriage, selflessness, motherhood, and conformity. Thus, the distinction between Sula and Nel is central to Morrison's analysis of black female identity. Nel preserves her social identity by adopting the position that is expected of her, but she still lacks her own individuality. Sula declares her independence, but because she refuses social connections, she is by herself. Neither lady is complete on her own. Their relationship serves as an example of how loss, friendship, memory, and social pressure all contribute to identity formation. In the end, Nel's grief for Sula shows that losing the friend who had grown to be a part of her is just as painful for her as losing Jude. Morrison uses Sula and Nel to explore the paradoxes of female selfhood in a restrictive social context. Sula's quest for identification is both heroic and horrible because total independence causes loneliness. In obeying, Nel belongs; yet in her belonging, she is denied wholeness. Thus, Morrison repudiates any simple dichotomy of individualism and convention. Sula proposes a far more agonising process of identification, one constructed by social critique, companionship, insubordination and longing; a journey leading to the unfulfilled desire for completeness. They are connected in the sense that they both acknowledge the constraints that Bottom neighbourhood and broader racial and gender hierarchy impose upon their existence as black women. Their bond can be understood both as an emotional tie and a device for self knowledge in Morrison. Through one another, Sula and Nel claim a few of the intimacy, autonomy, and self-definition that are in short supply in their social worlds. But despite their relationship, they have such different paths. While Sula is linked to passion, danger, rebellion, and self-invention, Nel is linked to duty, respectability, order, and marriage. The community views Sula as "evil" and Nel as "good," but Morrison softens this moral distinction. While Sula's alleged evil stems from her inability to embrace the responsibilities assigned to women, Nel's kindness is primarily a result of adhering to social expectations. Sula does not want to define herself by being attractive, getting married, having children, or helping out around the house. She wants to create herself rather than becoming what the community expects of her. Sula's rebelliousness is therefore fundamental to her identity. She doesn't want to marry, settle down, or have kids like other Medallion women do. She doesn't feel like she has to make anyone happy unless it makes her happy. The Bottom is scared of her independence, sexual freedom, and dislike of public opinion because they show how weak its moral order is. She is punished for breaking the law and for being there because the community believes that women should be honourable, selfless, and helpful to society. Nel, on the other hand, relies more on tradition and what people in society think. Her marriage to Jude has given her a social identity, but it has also limited how she sees herself. When Jude left Nel after having an affair with Sula, Nel's problems went beyond just losing a spouse. She also lost the sense of who she was that marriage had given her. Morrison demonstrates that conformity does not ensure inner completeness, despite potentially leading to social acceptance. Nel's emotional life is full of loss and incompleteness, even though she can still live in society.

Sula's freedom comes at a price. She loses the human connections that used to keep her alive when she goes against social norms. She doesn't feel like she fits in, but her defiance makes her stand out. Nel feels like she belongs when she follows the rules, but she doesn't feel free. Morrison won't make either side sound romantic. Instead, she uses the differences between Sula and Nel to show how hard it is to be completely yourself in a society where racial pressure, gender norms, and moral surveillance are all present. The tension gets worse as the book goes on. Sula dies alone, but Nel stays alive in the group. Both women are not whole. When Nel later realises that her biggest sadness is for Sula, it shows how close they are. Sula was more than just a friend; she was a big part of Nel's life. Through this exchange, Morrison suggests that selfhood is never completely individualistic. Friendship, conflict, memory, social criticism, and loss all have an effect on it.

So, Sula shows that being a woman is hard because you have to find a balance between being yourself and fitting in with other people. Sula represents the yearning for autonomy and self-determination, whereas Nel symbolises the safety and limitations of conformity. Morrison does not present either woman as a complete archetype. Instead, she brings them together to show how hard it is for black women to find happiness in a culture that limits their options. This unresolved conflict between individualism and community, freedom and loss, and insurrection and belonging gives the book its power.

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