



Research Paper

Sisterhood and Survival: Female Bonding and Resistance in Toni Morrison's *Sula*

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Abstract: This paper explores the themes of sisterhood, female bonding and resistance in Toni Morrison's *Sula*, focusing on how these elements function as mechanisms of survival for Black women within a racially and socially oppressive society. The novel situates female bonds as both sites of emotional refuge and sources of social defiance, illustrating how these connections empower women to navigate a world marked by patriarchal and racial violence. Morrison reveals that survival is never just about endurance—it is also about the bonds that shape who we are and the choices we make. By tracing the ups and downs of Sula and Neil's friendship, this paper shows how Morrison uses sisterhood to explore themes of identity, resilience and the fragile balance between individual freedom and community ties. Ultimately *Sula* positions female solidarity as a radical act that challenges hegemonic structures while also exposing its limitations within a fractured and patriarchal world.

Keywords: Toni Morrison's *Sula*, Sisterhood, Resilience, Survival, Friendship, Betrayal, Black feminism, race and gender

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I. Introduction

Black history began in Africa, where people lived in rich and powerful kingdoms like Egypt, Mali and Ghana. African people had their own cultures, languages and traditions long before slavery began. In the 1500s, Europeans started the slave trade taking millions of Africans to America and other places to work as slaves. They were forced to work on farms and in homes without freedom or pay. This period of slavery lasted for hundreds of years and caused deep pain and loss. Even after slavery ended in the 1800s, Black people still faced racism, unfair laws and violence. Many brave leaders like Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth fought for freedom and equal rights. Over time, Black people made great contributions in music, art, sports, science and politics.

Black feminism arose as a movement to address the interconnected oppressions of race and gender faced by Black women (hooks 15). In history, the women's rights movement mostly focused on white women and the civil rights movement focused on Black men. Because of this, the special problems of Black women were often ignored. Black feminists wanted to change that. They spoke about how Black women face unfair treatment only because of their color but also because of being women. The economically weak people who are always at the fringes of society or marginalized are doubly exploited by the elites of society. Why it is that the marginalized are always exploited and the people who are economically strong have the power and that is how, usually, the power structure in society operates. The poor are always exploited by the elite. (Priya 2)

Toni Morrison was a famous African American writer known for her powerful novels about Black life and culture. Her famous novels include *Beloved*, *The Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon*. Morrison's writing showed the beauty, pain and power of African American culture.

Morrison was the first African American woman to win the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Sula is a novel by Toni Morrison, first published in 1973. It tells the story of two African American women, Sula Peace and Nel Wright, who grow up together in a small town called the Bottom. Their friendship changes over time as they make different choices in life. This novel explores important themes such as friendship, betrayal, community, identity and freedom. It shows how people's choice and society's expectations

can shape their lives. Morrison also highlights the struggles faced by African American women, who deal with both racial and gender discrimination.

Through Sula and Nel's friendship, Morrison shows how good and evil are not always clear, and how independence can sometimes lead to loneliness. The novel also reveals how the community judges those who are different especially women who live by their own rules.

Sula is known for its beautiful language, deep emotion and strong message about the meaning of love, loyalty and self-identity. It remains one of Toni Morrison's most powerful works about the Black experience and the complexity of human relationships.

II. Review of Literature

Deborah E. McDowell argues that their relationship stages "the double conflict of Black females who are torn by antagonistic dual selves. For McDowell, the novel resists patriarchal narratives by locating female identity in the interplay between intimacy and estrangement (77).

Barbara Christin, in her influential essay "The Race for Theory", critiques abstract theoretical approaches and instead emphasises how Morrison's fiction grounds theory in lived Black female experience. Christian's perspective helps frame Sula as a text insists on reading beyond rigid moral categories. (52)

Similarly, Valerie Smith underscores Morrison's moral imagination, showing how her novels intertwine aesthetics with political vision. Smith reads Sula as emblematic of Morrison's ability to dramatize questions of freedom and accountability. (15)

Cheryl A. Wall situates Sula within a tradition of Black women's writing that interrogates family and community structures. In her essay "Extending the Line," Wall traces how Morrison and later novelists like Gloria Naylor complicate maternal legacies, highlighting the ambivalence of characters like Eva Peace. Such readings demonstrate that Morrison challenges idealized notions of motherhood, instead presenting mothers as both nurturing and destructive. (1452)

Other scholars, like A. Leslie Harris and Susan Willis, analyse the community's construction of "evil." Willis notes that by scapegoating Sula, the Bottom sustains itself as a collective, paradoxically depending on her transgressions for moral clarity (121). This does echo later studies of communal memory, which show how gossip and rumour operate as unofficial modes of history.

Together, this body of scholarship underscores the richness of Sula as a site for examining sisterhood, survival and moral ambiguity. By engaging these underexplored aspects, this paper seeks to extend existing debates and offers a fuller account of Morrison's complex vision.

Objectives

To analyze the concept of survival and sisterhood in Toni Morrison's *Sula*

III. Methodology

This research paper uses a qualitative approach to study the themes of sisterhood and survival in Toni Morrison's novel *Sula*. The method involves close reading of the text to understand how Morrison presents the bond between women and their struggles in a racist and patriarchal society. This paper also uses literary and textual analysis to explore the main characters, Sula and Nel, focusing on their friendship, conflicts and how their relationship reflects the larger experience of Black women.

Secondary sources such as critical essays, journal articles and books on Toni Morrison and Black feminism are used to support the analysis. These sources help in understanding different views on women's unity, identity and resistance.

Analysis

Morrison's *Sula* is at its core a novel about human relationships - fragile, flawed, and yet deeply meaningful. The friendship between Sula and Nel becomes the heart of the narrative, illustrating both the promise of solidarity and inevitability of rupture. A humanist lens reads this friendship as more than a plot device; it is an existential search for meaning in a world marked by loss and oppression. The novel is not just about their personal stories but also about the struggles of a community that tries to survive under racism and social pressure.

Sula, as a character, embodies radical individuality. Her refusal to conform to communal norms - whether in matters of sexuality, morality, or loyalty - marks her as an outsider. It does not simply condemn her but instead sees her as enacting the human struggle for authenticity. Her choices raise difficult ethical questions:

What does it mean to live freely? What is the cost of defying social expectation? Can survival sometimes demand betrayal? The community calls Sula wicked because she breaks the rules, but Morrison suggests that their judgement comes from fear. Sula's independence threatens their sense of order. She is not evil; she is simply different- free in a way others are afraid to be. This makes her a tragic but powerful character.

Nel, by contrast represents the pull of community and tradition. Her moral stability offers a foil to Sula's unpredictability. Yet through Nel's late-life realization- "All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude"- Morrison reveals the deep loss of sisterhood as more profound than romantic abandonment. It interprets this moment as Morrison's insistence that human connection, especially between women, is the deepest ground of survival. Nel's marriage does not make her truly happy; she becomes part of a community that values reputation over truth. When Sula returns after many years, Nel feels anger and jealousy but also a deep connection that she can't deny. Their friendship reveals how women need emotional understanding more than social approval. When Sula dies, Nel realizes too late that Sula was her other half, her true companion. Her final cry- "We was girls together" - is full of regrets, showing that sisterhood is essential for women's emotional survival.

The community of the Bottom further reflects the collective dimension of human life. Their rejection of *Sula* can be read as a communal survival mechanism, preserving order by punishing differences. Yet Morrison does not offer a simple moral judgement; rather, she compels readers to see the tragic necessity and cruelty of social cohesion, a profound human paradox. Morrison's writing style also adds depth to the novel. She uses poetic language, symbolism and shifts in time to connect personal pain with collective history. The Bottom's destruction at the end of the novel, when the land is sold for development, shows how Black communities are erased and forgotten by history. Yet, the memory of Sula and Nel's friendship remains- a quiet reminder of love, resistance and survival.

Ultimately, Morrison's narrative resists closure. Sula's death and Nel's belated grief suggest that the essence of human life is found not in certainty but in the open-ended search for meaning. *Sula* is not about moral absolutes but about honouring the complexity of human choices, relationships and resilience.

IV. Conclusion

Toni Morrison's *Sula* resists simple interpretations, offering instead a textured narrative that interrogates the meaning of identity, morality, and community. The novel's power lies in its ability to reveal the contradictions within human relationships- particularly friendship, kinship, and the fragile bonds that sustain collective life. Through Sula and Nel, Morrison stages a dialogue about freedom and conformity, selfhood and sacrifice, showing how individual choices reverberate beyond personal lives into the broader fabric of society. The unconventionality of Sula as a character challenges dominant expectations of womanhood, while the community's judgement of her underscores the social mechanisms that discipline difference. At the same time, Morrison refuses to render Sula's story as a moral lesson, instead leaving readers with the unsettling recognition that survival, love, and betrayal coexist in every human experience.

Thus, *Sula* endures as a work that expands the boundaries of the African American literary tradition, compelling to reimagine the complexities of freedom, friendship, and survival.

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