

Women Friendship in the novel *Sula*

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Abstract

This article examines the historical and cultural experiences of African-American women through the lens of Black feminist thought, with a focus on Toni Morrison's novel *Sula* (1973). The research question guiding this study is: How does *Sula* reflect the complexities of friendship, autonomy, and the quest for empowerment among Black women within a racist and patriarchal society? The study employs a literary analysis method, drawing on the historical context of Black American women's oppression and the emergence of Black feminist ideology as theorized by scholars like Patricia Hill Collins. Findings reveal that *Sula* intricately portrays the deep bond between the two protagonists, Sula Peace and Nel Wright, against the backdrop of systemic oppression. Their friendship symbolizes the broader struggle of African-American women to navigate personal autonomy within a community shaped by the legacy of slavery. Sula's defiance of societal norms, particularly in her relationships with men, highlights the challenges Black women face in seeking empowerment and identity in a society that marginalizes them.

This study concludes that *Sula* not only captures the historical context of Black women's experiences but also serves as a significant contribution to the discourse on Black feminist thought, emphasizing the importance of friendship, autonomy, and resistance in the fight for liberation.

Keywords: Autonomy, empowerment, patriarchy, Identity, resistance

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Introduction

The history of African-American women in the United States is marked by a legacy of oppression, beginning with their arrival as slaves and continuing through systemic denial of access to societal resources. This intersection of race, class, and gender oppression has deeply influenced the experiences of Black women in American society. In response to these challenges, Black feminist thought emerged as a powerful intellectual movement, advocating for the recognition of Black women's unique perspectives and struggles. Toni Morrison, one of the most celebrated African-American writers, has been a pivotal figure in this movement, using her novels to explore the complex realities of Black women's lives.

Racial discrimination has multiple dimensions. Toni Morrison raised the number of issues such as racial, social, political, patriarchal and sexual. In her own words Toni Morrison spoke, "I wanted to redirect, reinvent the political, cultural and artistic judgments saved for African American writers" (Sula, xii). In her literary creation *Sula*, Morrison has created numbers of female characters. Among them Sula Peace and Nel Wright had strong bond of friendship. Female friendship helps women counteract the effect of patriarchy, it also provides them with comfort, security and even healing. This study focuses on why the author emphasizes women's friendship in Toni Morrison's *Sula*. The study examines the impact of race, class and gender on women's relationships. It tries to uncover how women face the challenges of patriarchal institutions and other attempt to subjugate them through polygamy, neo-colonialism, constraints of tradition and gender practices.

Morrison narrates the story of two different family background girls, Sula and Nel, with different personal moral attitudes for their emancipation. This work foregrounds to

reveal how author applies the healing powers of female bonding, which helps women overcome prejudice, survive and enjoy female empowerment. The study explores how Toni Morrison use female friendship to challenge the power of patriarchy, racial segregation and social, cultural and sexual bond that pose a threat to female bonding and causes Black women's estrangement.

In Morrison's *Sula*, Black women's lives are miserable in Bottom. Which lies near the Medallion city. It is actually the hills above the valley but it was called Bottom when the black people lived there. The people in Bottom are dominated in multiple ways, firstly, they are oppressed through gender discrimination and secondly, they are subjugated by the so-called upper-class whites. Hence, the common experiences of the oppression urge them to form the bond in order to fight against such operation. This study makes significant contribution mainly in three areas of black women's problem. It concentrates on the two women characters in *Sula* to explore their relation with society. Second, this research makes a significant study on black feminism. And, lastly, the study shows the intricate relationship between the two protagonist female characters.

Black women Sula and Nel's common experience of oppression urges them to form bonds in order to fight back the impact of race, class, and gender. Female friendship not only helps women counteract the effects of patriarchy but it also provides them with comfort, security and even healing. So, the research helps to understand the experience of female protagonists in the patriarchal society.

Women, world over, have always been meted out with unfair practices and gross injustice, purely based on their gender. In the twenty first century, things haven't changed much, in spite of technological growth and development. The issues that the researcher will be examining have a universal significance. Although confined to the Afro-American milieu,

this thesis is very much relevant to the Nepalese context, as the plight of these women, and the problems that they encounter, are similar to that of women, in Hill and Terai and Dalit women in Nepal. The researcher will look at the various factors that have contributed to the deprived status of these women, by analyzing the growth or deterioration of the female protagonists in the novels of Morrison. This study becomes all the more relevant, as it would look into the ways and mechanisms by which women progress from a state of suppression to that of self-assertion. The findings of this study may throw light on similar movements in Nepal.

The question remains why and how the author execute female friendship to help women counteract the effect of patriarchy? The study is guided by the following research questions. The major research questions are:

1. What is nature of the friendship in *Sula*?
2. What are impacts of freedom among women characters?
3. What are the issues of black women?

This research is limited to Afro-American writer; Toni Morrison who paved the way for prominent women writers from black community. This study is also confined to the books of Morrison, *Sula*, and has used Black Feminist theory at a peripheral level, to analyze the characters. The researcher has also limited this study to the first half of the twentieth century and has taken into consideration the social conditions of those times, as the book *Sula* was published during that time and the writer was greatly influenced by the socio-political conditions of their times. There is randomness in the choice of works as the researcher has considered novels that have female protagonists and stories that deal with different aspects the friendship (*Sula*). The primary focus for this research has been the development of friendship in women as a psychological construct rather than as a social construct.

Review of relevant literature

Black feminism in the strong voice of Black women for their personal rights they step forward for their liberation and emancipation. They protest against patriarchal norms as well as for all Black people. The Black women fight to maintain their dignity and reputation in the contemporary society. They want to be identified as full women, free and a new world.

Deborah writes:

Upon her shoulders rests the big task to create and keep alive, in the breast of black men, a holy and consuming passion to break with the slave traditions of the past, to spurn and overcome the fatal insidious inferiority complex of the present which bobs up ever, to arrest the progress negro manhood movement, and to fight with increasing vigor, with dauntless courage, unrelenting Zeal and intelligent vision for attainment of the stature of a full woman, a free race and a new world. (187)

Black feminist literature came in to the mainstream literary trend after the feminist movement of 1960s. The Black literary texts and Black female writers were dominated by the great hegemony of western as well as white dominant literary trends. About Black feminist literary theory, Christian Barbara writes:

Black critical theory is quite different from western form of abstract of logic, and it is often I narrative form, in the stories we create in the riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem to our liking.... My folk in other words have always been a race theory through more in the form of the hieroglyphs, a written figure which is both sensual and abstract, both beautiful and communicative. (257-76)

One eminent critic Hortense J. Spillers writes his comments on *Sula*, “Sula is both loved and hated by the reader embraced and rejected simultaneously because her complex, alienated transitory gesture of personality who has no framework of moral reference beyond or other than herself” (222). About her novel Malcolm Bradbury remarks:

Some of striking writing comes from black women Toni Morrison and shows the novel’s complex involvement in the most serious issues of the time. The text generation of American storytelling is on the scene and at present in a state of its own becoming, as it too tries to deal with the present and rewrite the meanings of the recent past. (393)

Morrison has told us a black women’s story of that time, how they struggle to survive in a male dominated society which is suppressed by the whites as well. All the relations such as mother, wife and daughter are struggling to survive in the society. But I will focus on how the two girls have a bond and fight back the subjugation and have courage and strength to face such problem through their friendship.

Sula is lesbian novel not because Nel and Sula are lesbians they.... decidedly are not but because the novel provides a critique of heterosexual institution of male female relationships, marriage and the family, consciously or not Morrison’s work poses both lesbian and feminist questions about black women’s autonomy and their impact upon each other’s lives. (175).

Toni Morrison’s *Sula* (1973) has been analyzed by numerous critics in numerous ways since its publication. One eminent critic Hortense J. Spillers writes his comments on *Sula*, “Sula is both loved and hated by the reader embraced and rejected simultaneously because her complex, alienated transitory gesture of personality who has no framework of moral reference beyond or other than herself”(222). Sula major character of the novel is against the

subjugation and the domination of the society as well as the whites. She challenges the most norms and values of the society in search of self-identity. The study needs some theoretical framework for analyzing the theme of friendship between women in *Sula*.

Black feminist issues can be observed from multiple perspectives as their suppression, oppression and exploitation cover multiple dimensions of human suffering. The practice of segregation starts from race, and embraces gender, economic, political and sexual violence to black women. From Marxist perspective Black women are “Haves not group” or “proletariats”. Black male was also coming into the position of exploiter of black women. Patriarchal domination, sexual violence to black women, Racial, economic and political domination of black women were rampant in Afro American settlements called Bottom.

As Black feminist sociologist Deborah K. King succinctly states, “Black feminism asserts self-determination as essential” (1988, 72). Shirley Chisholm also points to the need for self-conscious struggle against the stereotypes that support social injustice. Domination always involves attempts to objectify the subordinate group. “As subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history,” asserts bell hooks (1989, 42). “As objects, one’s reality is defined by others, one’s identity created by others, one’s history named only in ways that define one’s relationship to those who are subject” (p. 42).

African-American women reveal the specific contours of Black women’s objectification as well as the ways in which oppressions of race, gender, sexuality, and class intersect. (Collins. 2000, p. 89). Patricia Hill states, “Historically, literature by U.S. Black women writers resist negative treatment and provides a comprehensive view of Black women’s struggles to form positive self-definitions in the face of derogated images of Black womanhood. (2000, p.110). The mother/daughter relationship is one fundamental relationship

among Black women. Countless Black mothers have empowered their daughters by passing on the everyday knowledge essential to survival as African-American women (Joseph 1981; Collins 1987). Whereas sexuality is part of intersecting oppressions, the ways in which it can be conceptualized differ. Sexuality can be analyzed as a freestanding system of oppression similar to oppressions of race, class, and gender. This approach views heterosexism as a system of power that victimizes Black women in particular ways (Collins, 2000, p.128).

A second approach examines how sexualities become manipulated *within* class, race, nation, and gender as distinctive systems of oppression and draw upon heterosexist assumptions to do so. Regulating Black women's sexualities emerges as a distinctive feature of social class exploitation, of institutionalized racism, of U.S. nation-state policies, and of gender oppression. (p.128) African-American women, critical social theory encompasses bodies of knowledge and sets of institutional practices that actively grapple with the central questions facing U.S. Black women as a collectivity. The need for such thought arises because African-American women as a *group* remain oppressed within a U.S. context characterized by injustice (26).

The study is based on the theory of Black Feminism thought developed by Patricia Hill Collins. Collins states, "Black feminist thought's core themes, interpretive frameworks, epistemological stances, and insights concerning empowerment will reflect and aim to shape specific political contexts confronting African-American women as a group" (Collins, 2000, p .34). The term 'Black feminism' is directly related to the activities of the Black women who are racially and sexually dominated by the white people as well as Black males. They try to seek their identity and existence through literature. The Black feminists usually focus on the interconnection between races, gender and class. Besides racial and sexual Black feminist movement raised the political and psychological issues. The allegation is that the mainstream

of western feminism includes the concerns of white, Christian and middle-class women and puts aside the voices of minority women- black, Jew and others. Unlike white women, Black women are not only subject to sexual role in patriarchy but have to deal with second set of problem compounded by their particular ethnic status and circumstances. In other words, they are oppressed as women and oppressed as minority Black.

In patriarchal society, men control conceptual area and determine social values as well as the structures of institutions. It is man who explains, analyses and describes and directs the female since he has the power to define everything else. They attend male dominated schools and colleges and read books prepared by the white men. Women are controlled and cultivated through social institution. They are subjects to such social institutions and naming system and ultimately, they adopt the images made by white power. As Patricia Hill Collins, “Among African American women an increased understanding of the racial, gender and sexual relationships enable African-American women to tap sources of power as energy and thus become more empowered” (Collins, 168). Friendship between women in *Sula* also Sula and Nel.

In Toni Morrison’s *Sula*, Black women’s lives are miserable in Bottom. Which lies near the Medallion city. It is actually the hills above the valley but it was called Bottom when the black people lived there. The people in Bottom are dominated in multiple ways, firstly, they are oppressed through gender discrimination and secondly, they are subjugated by the so-called upper-class whites. Hence, the common experiences of the oppression urge them to form the bond in order to fight against such operation. Female friendship helps women counteract the effect of patriarchy, it also provides them with comfort, security and even healing.

Methodology

The conventional research methods in English studies are textual analysis, to auto/biographical methods, discourse analysis, interviews, visual methodologies, archival methods, ethnographic methods, hermeneutics, oral history and to the latest, where creative writing is used as a method and finally, research using information and communication technologies. English studies stand to benefit from these methods enabling the study of subjective constructions of the self and others, through the spoken narrative.

The current study has made use of textual analysis, critical interpretations of texts, hermeneutics and exegesis as methodologies for research. Any specific textual analysis is made at a particular historical moment and within a specific culture. The analysis is not comprehensive and does not include all possible readings, but at the same time, is able to create new ideas. “The text makes certain demands on the individual analyzing them and provides the material for analysis. It also reproduces or reiterates meanings, which always come from the outside” (*Research Methods for English Studies* 167). Textual analysis depends on how the reader gathers meaning. Interpretations always involve knowledge beyond the text. Some of this is general, some personal and some are derived from secondary sources.

Textual analysis has to be informed by background research into the context of the cultural artifact under scrutiny, the context of its production, its content and its consumption. Understanding meaning-making, differently understood in different historical periods and by different theoreticians, is key to undertaking textual analyses. The researcher has tried to unearth information through textual analysis which has generated questions - the answers for which have been found during the course of this study. Critical interpretation focuses on texts and their interpretations and analysis in order to grasp how meaning works. Hermeneutics as an area is concerned with issues of meaning and understanding of texts and provides the

theoretical framework for the interpretation of texts. Exegesis, on the other hand, looks at the practice of interpreting texts. In the context of literary criticism, hermeneutics, through an understanding of the history and culture of the country and times of the author, focuses on whether the reader is able to decipher the meanings and thoughts held by the author. Toni Morrison's *Sula* is the primary sources that the researcher has used to prove how the suppressed 'self' of an Afro-American woman progresses towards self-assertion. A variety of critical interpretations in the form of articles, books, commentaries, e-books and on-line sources have been heavily relied upon as secondary sources of information. Black Feminist Theory developed by Patricia Hill Collins remains the touchstone for argument and counter-arguments in an effort to show the relationship between female characters in the above - mentioned works.

In this study research methodology comprises interpreting and analyzing the selected primary sources of the novelist. I will support my findings with a significant number of critical writings on these works which also deal with the similar theme friendship between women in contemporary times. To make the interpretations more significant and relevant, I would work within the specific guidelines of Black feminist theory. The above-mentioned novel *Sula* of Toni Morrison will be critically evaluated within the framework of Patricia Hill Collins' Black Feminist thought.

Findings/ Discussion

Morrison's *Sula* provides a profound exploration of the lives of Black women in the Bottom, a fictional community that mirrors the broader African-American experience. The novel portrays the deep bond between Sula Peace and Nel Wright, two women whose friendship is central to the narrative. The novel also delves into the complex relationships

within the African-American community, particularly between women, and the ways in which these relationships are shaped by the legacy of slavery and ongoing racial oppression.

The friendship between Sula and Nel serves as a microcosm of the broader struggles faced by African-American women. Their relationship, marked by both deep connection and profound betrayal, reflects the tensions between personal autonomy and communal expectations. Sula's defiance of societal norms, particularly in her relationships with men, challenges the traditional roles assigned to Black women and highlights the difficulties of seeking empowerment in a society that marginalizes and oppresses them. Morrison's portrayal of these themes underscores the importance of Black feminist thought in understanding and addressing the unique challenges faced by African-American women.

Historical Context of Black American

Looking back to the history, African-American women were brought to the United States to work as slaves. Their oppression describes and unjust situation where, systematically and over a long period of time, White people denied their access to the resources of society. Patrick Hill Collins writes, "Race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, age, and ethnicity constitute major forms of oppression of Black women in the United States (Collins, 21). However, the convergence of race, class, and gender oppression characteristic of U.S. slavery shaped all subsequent relationships that women of African descent had within Black American families and communities, with employers, and among one another. It also created the political context for Black women's intellectual work. Patricia Hill Collins theorized and advocated black feminist ideology in her *Black Feminist Thought* in 2000 making excellent use of oral history, interviews, music, poetry, fiction, and scholarly literature. Hill proposes to illuminate black women's standpoint. Collins observes:

Black women's writings were criticized by some Black men, such as Robert Staples's (1979) analysis of Ntozake Shange's (1975) chore poem, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide*, and Michele Wallace's (1978) controversial volume, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, illustrates the difficulty of challenging the masculinist bias in Black social and political thought" (25).

Black feminist critic Barbara Christian (1994), a pioneer in creating Black women's studies in the U.S. academy, queries whether Black feminism can survive the pernicious politics of resegregation. Alice Walker encountered similar hostile reactions to her publication of *The Color Purple*. However, works by Elizabeth Spelman (1988), Sandra Harding (1986, 1998), Margaret Andersen (1991), Peggy McIntosh (1988), Mab Segrest (1994), Anne Fausto-Sterling (1995), and other individual U.S. White feminist thinkers reflect sincere efforts to develop a multiracial, diverse feminism (23). In describing the response of African American men to the outpouring of publications by Black women writers in the 1970s and 1980s, reflecting on African American women, Collins observes:

Being Black and female in the United States continues to expose American women to certain common experiences. U.S Black women's similar work and family experiences of African- American culture mean that, overall, U.S Black women as a group live in a different world from that people who are not Black and female (Collins, 23).

Toni Morrison epitomized this black feminist movement with her best literary creations namely; *The Bluest Eyes*, *Sula* and *Beloved*. Among these the novels *Sula* reveals the live experiences and deep bond between Black women. Female relationship between women in *Sula* can be studied in context of African American writers and their movements for liberation of Black women in America.

Black American writers and Toni Morrison

Some of the representative writers of Black literary writings were James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Zora Neale. These writers raised the voices of Black suppression, oppression and exploitation in Afro-American context. According to A. Tamilselvi and R.M. Prabha, “Black Feminism is the process of self-conscious struggle that empowers women. The black women’s marginalization and oppression forced them to search for self-awareness and self-empowerment” (2016, 79). As they critical observe:

Toni Morrison stresses that black women can never become fully empowered in a context of social injustice. In her works, Morrison has explored the experience and roles of black women in a racist and male dominated society and longings for the search for cultural identity” (2016, 79).

In fact, Toni Morrison represents the most powerful Afro-American writer. She epitomizes black women protagonists in natural setting and expresses the black suffering culminating in their emancipation. Toni Morrison was recognized by numbers of prizes and awards for her literary creation. Toni Morrison is the winner of the 1993 Nobel Prize for literature and she has also received Pulitzer Prize, National and American Book Award. She represents one of the most celebrated black woman writers in Afro American context. Morrison is the author of eleven novels and the most recent published one entitled *God Help the Child*. 'The Bluest Eye,' 'Sula,' 'Song of Solomon,' and 'Beloved' are among her best-known novels. In Toni Morrison's *Sula* (1973), focused on emancipation process of African American women in relation to black community. This has been reflected in the life of women with a particular reference to Sula Peace and Nel Wright. Morrison tends to be not only a novelist but also a reformist for how an African American Woman could avoid being

an impetuous paradigm for emancipation. Hence, woman's autonomy is the preoccupation of Morrison, not only in *Sula* but in most of her novels.

Women Friendship in *Sula*

Toni Morrison's novel *Sula* (1973) opens up with miserable life of black women in Bottom which lies near the Medallion city. This novel opens in a place called the Bottom, and the first person we meet is Shadrack. He has returned from World War I as a shell-shocked veteran, and when he finally gets out of the hospital after being injured, he starts National Suicide Day as a way to cope with death. This day becomes important by the end of the novel.

Comparing to Nel's. Sula's house is always busy and noisy, her mother is not concerned about what proper or improper, and her one legged grandmother Eva entertains a string of men. Some boarders also live in Sula's house, including three boys named Dewey and a man named Tar Baby, whose only interest is drinking himself to death. We soon learn that Hannah has a habit of sleeping with married man, regarding sex as fun and not a big deal. Sula eventually adopts this same attitude, which has some devastating consequences later in the society. Sula has an uncle named Plum, who returns from war addicted to drugs and on the verge of death. He moves back in to Eva's house and seems to get worse and worse, until one day Eva can't take it anymore. She pours kerosene on him and lights him on fire while he's in bed. We eventually learn that she does this believing she is giving him a death suitable for a man.

Regarding the friendship between Sula and Nel, a lot happens to them throughout the years. Sula learns that her mom doesn't really like her. She and Nel are involved in an accident that results in the drowning of a boy named Chicken little. Sula's mom Hannah dies in a fire. Nel gets married to a man named Jude, and Sula leaves town for ten years, returns,

and has an affair with Jude. A few years later, Sula gets involved with a man named Ajax, but when she senses that she's getting too possessive, he takes off. Sula falls ill shortly after that and eventually dies.

The protagonist of the novel *Sula* dies in winter, and the people in the Bottom really suffer from the cold weather. But then January rolls around, the sun comes out, and so does Shadrack with his national Suicide Day. This one is different, though, as a good deal of the townspeople join in his annual match. They make their way to a new tunnel that's under construction, one that blacks have been prevented from working on, and start destroying the supplies and tools to vent their anger against discrimination. They eventually enter the tunnel, but it isn't stable and it collapses around them, killing almost everyone in town.

The temporal frame of the novel covers about 25 years. In the final setting, Nel visits Sula's grandmother Eva in the senior home. Eva accuses Nel of standing by and letting Chicken Little drown all those years ago. We find out that it's true: Nel watched him drown and enjoyed it. She's so upset that she heads to Sula's grave and sadly thinks about how none of the townspeople mourned Sula's death. As she's leaving, she passes Shadrack on the street, who is also lost in sad thoughts. Suddenly, Nel calls out for Sula and finally forgives her for cheating with Jude. She starts crying, for the first time in years. The novel's final line leaves us with the image of grieving Nel.

Though, Toni Morrison stated; "Greater attention to the traumatic displacement of the most wasteful capitalist war had on black people, my focus in *Sula* is in Friendship between women in Black community as a strategy of survival" (*Sula*, xiv). Black women Sula and Nel's common experience of oppression urges them to form bonds in order to fight back the impact of race, class, and gender. Female friendship not only helps women counteract the effects of patriarchy but it also provides them with comfort, security and even

healing. Although the novel acknowledges the importance of female friendship, Morrison deliberately chooses to portray failed relationships in order to emphasize the power of patriarchy and warn women about the danger of lack of bonding among the women.

Kavita Arya emphasizes that Sula "rejects the traditional norms of feminine respectability like family, marriage, children, grand parental care, sexual mores and the concept of steady job. She hates to see a woman only as a wife, mother and daughter"(42). Morrison shows the impact of patriarchal structures on female bonding and what it means to be black and a women. Sula and Nel Wright in *Sula* form bonds in their girlhood that allow them to nurture each other and challenge the pain of patriarchal oppression. In her own words Morrison focusses on, "not only conventional society but on female friendship" which has made worthy of research on the women's friendship in black community.

Conclusion

Toni Morrison's *Sula* is a seminal work that captures the complexities of Black women's experiences in the United States. Through her depiction of Sula and Nel's friendship, Morrison illuminates the broader themes of autonomy, empowerment, and the ongoing struggle against racial and gender oppression. The novel serves as a powerful testament to the resilience and strength of African-American women, and it continues to be a vital contribution to the discourse on Black feminist thought. Morrison's work not only reflects the historical context of Black American women's lives but also offers insights into their enduring quest for identity and liberation.

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