"EXPLORING IDENTITY AND SELF-DISCOVERY IN TONI MORRISON'S *SULA*"

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Abstract

This paper examines the themes of identity and self-discovery in Toni Morrison's novel *Sula*. Through the complex relationships and personal journeys of the characters, particularly the protagonist Sula Peace, Morrison presents a nuanced exploration of what it means to find oneself within the constraints of society, family, and personal desires. By analyzing the novel's key events, character dynamics, and symbolic elements, this study aims to highlight how Morrison uses the narrative to reflect broader social and cultural questions about identity.

Keywords: Identity, Self-Discovery, Gender Role, Societal Expectations, Cultural Influences.

1. Introduction

Toni Morrison's *Sula*, published in 1973, is a powerful narrative that delves into the lives of African American women in the early 20th century. The novel is set in the fictional town of Medallion, Ohio, and centers on the tumultuous friendship between Sula Peace and Nel Wright. Through their stories, Morrison explores themes of identity, self-discovery, and the impact of societal expectations. This paper aims to analyze how these themes are portrayed in the novel and how they reflect the broader issues of race, gender, and individuality.

Literature reflects the life and lifestyle of either a community or an individual. At times, it may tell about a particular society, spanning a particular culture, faith, attitudes and attributes and what and how do people think about a specific motif, motto or purpose. The story of a community or a group of people may be functional but it portrays their lives through different characters

Identity formation in one's own country does not carry any significance because it is natural and one need not struggle for it. For a foreigner, in a country like America when the situation is worst, under pressure, stress and slavery, it is self-identity one craves for. They are two different terms: Self and Identity. They are two different concepts also.

'Self' is an umbrella terms that encompasses several aspects like personal, social, religious and political. Speaking about the notion of the 'Self', Adjaero focuses on psychological elements of how the notion of 'Self' is a decisive factor in one's life: 'Social psychologists believe that because of social interactions, the self-concept as a person's understanding of his or her own being is shaped, reshaped and influenced by many factors such as the environment, cultural and historical background, family status especially parental relations, religious beliefs, etc.' (Adjaero, 1996, p.59).

Sula is a very good illustration for the formation of one's identity. The black community in American struggled hard towards achieving identity even when they were suppressed by the white dominated society. It is the story of a girl from her birth to her death and the process of predicament that paved the way for her despair and destruction. It holds good in the context of a racist and sexist society that rules the minority. The course of events that follow one after the other, her experiences with the people of her own community and of the dominant group that suppresses them. Sula 'depicts the process of her individuation

and the forms of her personal and social identity construction under the influence of her life events and experiences as an African American female.'

2. Objectives

1. To explore the concept of identity as depicted in *Sula*.
2. To analyze the process of self-discovery experienced by the main characters.
3. To examine the societal and cultural factors influencing the characters' identities.

3. The Concept of Identity in *Sula*

a. Sula Peace's Identity

Sula is portrayed as a rebellious and unconventional character. Her identity is shaped by her desire to break free from societal norms and expectations. Sula's actions, such as her sexual promiscuity and refusal to conform to traditional female roles, challenge the status quo and define her as an outcast in her community.

Sula is the protagonist who lived in oppressed situations; she had to swim against the tide. It was all because of the cultural superiority of the white society which dominated them. She struggled for her identity in the inferior cultural context. The novel depicts the struggle of every character on the path of identity formation. In the words of Bloom H., '"Sula is the story of a girl who is a rebel against all society, all conventions and nearly all moralities" (Bloom, 1999, p.63). Even when she was dying, she felt satisfied because she lived her life to the extent of her will and decision. She opposed and rebelled against repression and exploitation:

b. Nel Wright's Identity

In contrast to Sula, Nel initially conforms to societal expectations. Her identity is closely tied to her roles as a daughter, wife, and mother. However, as the story progresses, Nel undergoes a journey of self-discovery that leads her to question these roles and her own desires.

To analyze*Sula* and discuss it in the background of black identity in the context of white dominance, it is better to highlight on identity crisis. In the course of the novel, the

characters of Morrison pass through many tests and trials that fortify the traits of their personality. Shadrack, for instance, is a man of socially damaging attributes. His insanity is an obstacle to be the citizen of America in the sense that his lifestyle is compatible with the American philosophy. Referring to the black community at the Bottom, their life of leisure and pleasure was the barrier for their positive progress.

Sula is not a mere story but it is linked with irony and symbolism. Morrison's storyline establishes the required effect. The land occupied by the blacks was worthless; however, when the white masters realized the worth, they compelled them to evict it. They were forced to go to the nearby valley.

4. The Process of Self-Discovery

a. Sula's Journey

Sula's journey of self-discovery is marked by her departure from Medallion and her subsequent return. Her experiences outside the town shape her understanding of herself and her place in the world. However, her return to Medallion highlights the complexities of her identity, as she struggles to reconcile her individuality with the community's expectations.

.The feeble aspects of the black characters have significant value which enrich and fortify the thematic value of the story. They have a semantic weight age too which damages the identity of the self. Sula's lust and lechery have made her character loose. Her illicit relation with her best friend Nel's husband named Jude Greene and Sula's adolescent acquaintance Ajax had also a love affair. *Sula* Peace, the antagonist of the novel *Sula*, did not marry; her life was marked with indelible dots of sexual vice and this is the reason, she was notorious.

In the long history of the black community in America, from slavery to freedom, it took centuries. The transition from black identity to Afro-American identity, they had to pass through murderous tests and tribulations. They confronted a strange culture in America. Their hardship resulted in forming an identity of their own which is otherwise called African-American identity. Recognition of race has been through Complexion of the skin.

Black men were not given equal access.   White world had workforce of the black servitude.

During importation from Africa to America, the black community lost its identity and when families were imported, they became broken and with the result their identity was also distorted. As the days passed by, kinship was also lost.

b. Nel's Journey

Nel's self-discovery is a more gradual process. Her friendship with Sula serves as a catalyst for her questioning of societal norms. After Sula's death, Nel reflects on her own life and realizes the depth of her connection to Sula, leading to a profound understanding of her own identity. A few characters do not think of their individual identity because they are pessimistic in their approach to life. *Sula* spends her time by living in her own world. It can be due to her self-hatred because *Sula* did not achieve anything in her life. Her deformed personality in her society had a different reaction. Before dying, what *Sula* said to Nel reflects the plight of a black woman who lacks either individual or collective identity.

5. Societal and Cultural Influences

a. Gender Expectations

The novel highlights the restrictive gender roles imposed on women in the early 20th century. Sula's defiance of these roles and Nel's eventual questioning of them underscore the novel's critique of societal expectations.

Black literature and Movements were the tools Afro-Americans used against their white rulers. The New World compelled them to renounce their religion and to embrace Christianity. Their primitive traditional lifestyle was snatched. A Negro wanted to live in three positions: like a human being, an independent citizen of America without renouncing his traditional ways of life. 'A concomitant to this state is an unending and always expanding Quest for identity in an everchanging context.' (37)

Digressing from the general point of view regarding identity of the Negros in America, the Afro-American women had doubled struggle against race, class and gender. Race and class distinction was prevalent everywhere and gender disparity had suppressed them in all

walks of life. They had to fight against their negative image. The intensity of their torture was that Afro-American women were considered as 'Non-human beings'. But African-American women writers reversed the statement and made them human beings who hearts have their own desires and aspirations. In fact, black writers gave their genuine image back to them.

The position of women in the white dominant society was that of a feeble slave who could satisfy their lust. The ever humiliated personality of a black woman had no identity of her own except that of a female creature that was able to serve others in all respects and at all times.

Her quest for identity had no meaning to the white exploiters. This is the main reason for *Sula* and Nel to choose different paths of life, according to their whims and fancies. The two characters of *Sula* and Nel had different identities in the Bottom.

b. Racial Identity

As African American women, Sula and Nel's identities are also shaped by their experiences of racism and marginalization. The novel explores how these experiences influence their perceptions of themselves and their relationships with others.

The identity of the black women was degraded by their own men who were busy in rescuing their manhood. Male preoccupation made them independent in the field of decision making which led them to destruction, many a time. A black woman had the support and friendship of another black woman owing to the fact that they mutually encouraged each other. They had two factors in mind: one was their survival and another was to overcome the doubled pressure of the whites' exploitation. To a great extent, *Sula* depicts the role of female characters in the backdrop of situational victimization.

Sula is an event-based story. In other words, it is a story which has been linked by using instances and happenings belonged to the past with the present. There is no straight story to relate. It is event-oriented. Every character craves for the identity of the self but the loophole is that everyone of them has their own defects and weaknesses which make them lose their personal identity. It is an undeniable fact that black women do not have

patriarchal protection. All characters of *Sula* have no parental identity. Quest is no matter with regard to parental support. No member of Sula's family provides her protection.

6. Morrison's Commentary

Morrison uses the characters' journeys to comment on broader social and cultural issues. Through Sula and Nel, she explores the complexities of identity and the ways in which it is shaped by both internal desires and external pressures. The novel ultimately suggests that self-discovery is a continuous and multifaceted process.

She tries hard to create her own identity by changing places and people.   She quit Medallion and went searching for the ambience where she could get individual identity. For ten years she had been away from the Bottom. When she came back 'Sula, as the symbol of a rebellious female character in a black community, is the major character who deals with issues of identity formation in social contexts such as family, school, church and her town.' (43)

As far as one's identity is concerned, one starts behaving in the same manner which is available in the environment and locality. One automatically categorizes oneself from the age when one is conscious of his society and its norms. Rejection of the social norms means staying aloof from one's people and family. Caste, class, gender, and race are the four pillars on which a society usually rests. This is a general categorization that is deep-rooted. According to Tajfel, social status or class is formed when an individual lives in a group of people; it is his first identity. Strictly speaking, his family is his primary identity but as a social animal, man's behaviour changes based on the situations and people with whom he interacts.   'Tajfel believes that this social categorization leads to the creation of different groups in the society and the individuals' tendency to join these groups and show biased behavior due to their in-group and out-group attitudes'.(44)

In case of a black community, its language, culture, faith, religion and ambience in which he is brought up count a lot. Every society is influenced by the hegemonic caste and class. Gender is secondary to their attitude. The norms of a society are standardized by the dominant group. The economic status of a group of people and their cultural values are the factors that affect other people who are supposed to be minority group.   This classification either on the basis of caste, class, colour or race, is a shame for humanity.

'This social identification and social categorization, according to Tajfel, leads to social comparison in which the individual compares his/her physical, psychological and social characteristics to other members of the society. (Tajfel, 1984). (45)

To speak about identity of a black man or woman, Morrison has taken the main roles of *Sula* and Nel. Their friendship is a symbol of how a person's identity can be created on the basis of one's rapport and interaction. It depends on how one perceives the feelings of his fellow-beings. On the other hand, the basic structure of a person is his family. Therefore, family and the environment in which he lives are his identities.

Conclusion

Toni Morrison's *Sula* offers a rich exploration of identity and self-discovery. Through the characters of Sula and Nel, Morrison examines the ways in which individuals navigate societal expectations and personal desires. The novel's portrayal of these themes reflects broader issues of race, gender, and individuality, making it a profound commentary on the human experience. By analyzing the characters' journeys and the societal influences they face, this paper has highlighted the complexity of identity as depicted in Morrison's work.

Toni Morrison's *Sula* is a story of a black woman's changing self-perception through her role in matrimony and society. The journey that *Sula* undertakes is not as easy as appears. The course of her life becomes a sort of saga for her as it is a incessant effort that she has to put up in her fight against the whites. The self-expressive journey is thwarted many times in *Sula*however, her experiences boost her confidence towards being more rebellious in nature. *It* is a unique story of a community in which black women dominate public and private areas of life.

Sula transcends stereotype protagonists. She lives with a deliberate extravagance. Her tough and rough attitude and her self-confidence results from an unstable relationship with her mother. Sula is at large sans obligation towards none. There is an abrupt and dramatic turn in Sula's view when she becomes aware of the hatred of her mother towards her. She is psychosomatically independent. She turns a human being who is devoid of emotions, ambition, material comfort, greed, desire, and luxury.She was away from Medallion for a decade; it was a life of experimentation and trial, not conforming to the conventional Afro-

American woman. In brief, she led a life of immorality and unethical fantasies.   The illicit relationships with white and black people had made her go astray. She lost all the personality traits of the women of her community. The idiosyncratic way of life detached her from the rest of the community people.

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