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**THE ISSUES AND CHALLENGES OF FEMININE IDENTITY, FREEDOM AND
EQUALITY IN TONI MORRISON'S SULA**

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Abstract

This paper explores the issues and challenges faced by the females, specially of African-American society. In her works, Toni Morrison, explores the position, state and problems of females in the male dominating society. The present article is a study of the female characters of Toni Morrison's novel Sula, is about their struggles, strength, determination and love used to challenge discrimination and injustice of the society, community and of their own family where they have to live and survive. This paper provides an insight for the analysis of Morrison's Female characters, particularly in Sula.

Toni Morrison, the Nobel prize winning author's novels appear to criticize the feminist concept of unrestricted freedom. Sula, is Toni Morrison's second novel, published in 1973, after *The Bluest Eye*, (1970). The female characters of her novel, Sula, are struggling for their liberation from being manipulated by the male dominated society and community. They are in dynamic involvement with and at the same time are critically opposed to the system of society in which they live in order to assert their feminine self. In Sula, Morrison explores what she believes to be one of the most damaging components of sexist and racist oppression on black women perpetuation by the larger society of an Anglo-Saxon standard of female beauty as a measurement of self worth. As she said, "The concept of physical beauty as a virtue, is one of the dumbest, most pernicious and destructive ideas of the Western world, and we should have nothing to do with it. Physical beauty has nothing to do with our past, present and future."¹ Toni Morrison's Sula, is a contemporary novel about female friendship, offers a view of female psychological development that defies traditional male-centered interpretations of female development and calls out for an expansion of the women-centered paradigm.

Keywords: interpretations of female, contemporary, damaging components

Introduction

Morrison in her novel Sula, presents the true picture of black life of the females, who survived a lot due to the circumstances. They lost their sense of community, their culture and being migrated from community. They could be captured by the ropes of slavery, bondage, male dominance and insecurity. To be free, the females have to take risk. Morrison observes that freedom is choosing your responsibilities. Morrison is not intent upon merely affirming the existence of the fear, frustration and fury

inherent in black life; she wishes to expose the psychic causes for the social distortions within a black community. In Sula, Morrison creates the character of Sula, who wishes to break free from this social cycle of denial and certitude. She wishes to create her own reality which thrives upon the fluidity and free play of call and response and does not seek bottom like constructs as an effrontery to contradiction and chaos. On the other hand, Nel attempts to find her self and place in her childhood dream for some fiery prince. Sula leaves the bottom for

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seeking her own dream of herself galloping on a horse at top speed. She becomes the archetypal running man of American literature who seeks a physical as well as emotional freedom from the order and control of society. Sula is an exploration of that dimension of the feminine psyche or self which is often hidden from view because it is horrible and problematic too, to deal with. Banyiwala-Horne goes on to say that this scary life exists in all women and, for that matter, in all human beings and it specifically seeks to break count on Sula, as the narrator says,

... completely free of ambition, with no affection for money, property or things, no greed, no desire to command attention or compliments no ego. for that reason she (feels) no compulsion to verify herself be consistent with herself.²

Sula's reactionary realization create a fissure between Sula and Nel which points to the inherent contradictions in their call and response synthesis. Sula reacts to Chicken Little's unanticipated death with her own kind of free-fall away from social and emotional expectations, Nel retreats to the safety of the familiar fixed principles of the Bottom. The divergent paths of the two women offer two perspectives on communal reality. Nel responds to Chicken's death much as the community might do with what she later realizes as a calm, controlled behavior. Nel decides to marry a local boy, Jude, and she sublimates her consciousness for the conviction of marriage, because of the thought that beyond her friendship with Sula, this is new feeling of being needed by someone who saw her singly. On the other hand, Jude imagines that being married to Nel can give him some more posture of adulthood that a wife can somehow fill the void of economic and emotional incompleteness in his life:

Whatever his fortune, whatever the act of his garment, there would always be the hem the

tuck and fold that hid his raveling edges; a someone sweet, industrious and loyal to shore him up.³

Jude and Nel are equally products of a community which looks to whatever kind of controlling Mechanism that may protect them from the impingements of the world. Like Helen, Nel becomes exactly what the community wishes her to be. They saw marriage as a means to upward mobility. A number of the women in Sula got married, represented by an anonymous chorus of women who held themselves in esteem for having and maintaining relationships with frequently wayward husbands. The novel points out the complexity of black women's lives, as they suffered a lot, specially about the concern of their relationships with white men. Sula, had a bad reputation in the society of blacks because of the rumours that she is physically involved and had sex with a white man. In general, the conservative society reserved a disrespect value for sexually liberated women, but the idea that a black woman chose to engage with a White man sexually, due to the history of rape of black women during and after slavery. Unlike Sula, Nel, Eva and other characters in the bottom hoped for someone else to save them from the grips of racism and poverty. However, they blend of the two necessary constituents of authentic selfhood, emphatic caring and self-assertion, argues for actual individual growth and potential interdependence among members of a community. Morrison hopes to create a different community, as composed by the characters of her novels. Thus, the exchanges between women-centered psychologists, minority women writers and readers of both might constitute the speech of a new community. Sula is based on the underlying condition that fragmentation and displacement are the fundamentals and barriers to the formation of African-American identities. The

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characters assume that they must have an ordinary self and/or that they can acquire it with or through another. The world in *Sula* is inverted and the model is ironic, as Deborah McDowell asserts, "Morrison strikes more elegiac chord"⁴. The displacements begin with the novel's setting ,which begins with the first sentence. In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the medallion city Golf Course, there was once a neighbourhood. As Morrison explains, "this lost world is fragmented into oppositions: place/neighborhood, they/neighbors (and implicitly whites/blacks), nightshade/blackberry, roots/Medallion, houses/gold course, and past/present."⁵ . In *Sula* many issues depicted in terms of opposing

values or terms. The present is directly contrasted with the past, and female and male roles are opposed. The Wrights, the Greenes, and the Bottom itself are studies in social conformity, which is set against the individual freedom of the Peaces. The story of *Sula*, Nel ,Eva, Helen and other female characters of the novel becomes an investigation of the meanings of good and evil, the values associated with monogamy and promiscuity, and the relevance of innocence and experience. By what it leaves out as well as by what it includes, the novel contrasts presence and absence And, especially through *Sula*'s meditations on her identity, the novel explores the relationship between self and other.

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